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## The Dragoon Detective; or, A Man of Destiny

BY DR. FRANK POWELL.--"White Beaver."



BUT, QUICK AS A FLASH, UP FLEW ONE HAND KNOCKING THE WEAPON FROM THE GRASP OF THE DRAGOON DETECTIVE.



# The Dragoon Detective;

## OR, A MAN OF DESTINY.

A Romance of the Road Raiders  
of the Rockies.

BY DOCTOR FRANK POWELL,  
"White Beaver," Chief of the Winnebagoes.

### CHAPTER I. THE OLD MINER.

IN one of the wildest parts of the Rocky Mountains, where the streams, gulches and hills have panned out many a golden fortune for the miner who had dared the dangers of the wilderness and faced death daily in the reckless camps, an old man stood gazing, like one fascinated by the charming of a snake, upon the ground at his feet.

He was at the head of a small ravine, with a cliff rising above him fully sixty feet, over which tumbled a torrent in the rainy season, but which was a dry water-course in the summer droughts.

On either side the cliff broke away, or merged into steep, rugged hills to the end of the ravine or gulch a few hundred yards away.

The man stood upon loose earth, lately dug up, it seemed, and in it were innumerable sparkling objects reflecting back the rays of the declining sun which peered over a distant mountain, and piercing through the forest foliage, fell upon the very spot where the miner stood, for the pick grasped in his hand and the shovel at his feet proved him to be such.

It seemed like a sunburst of hope, of vast riches to be found there, this falling of the sun's rays upon that very spot, while all else near was in shadow.

A man of large frame, well-knit, clad in red woolen shirt, rough black pants, top-boots and a slouch hat, he was the picture of an ideal miner, though his long hair and beard were iron-gray, and time had told off over two score and ten years of his life.

His face was a noble one, not bearing the impress of one accustomed to the wild life of the mines, but stamped with refinement and intellect.

A belt, containing a revolver and knife, was about his waist, a rifle leaned against a tree near by, and the shovel and pick completed his outfit.

Still as a statue stood the miner, his eyes glaring as brightly as the upturned gold at his feet.

Then he began to tremble, as though from a chill and sinking upon his knees he gave one long, loud, ringing cry, and clutched at the golden specks as though he was fearful they would flit away from his vision.

Like one gone mad he groveled about upon the earth, laughing one moment, crying at another, and then causing the darkening woods to echo with his shouts.

At last he became calm, and staggering to his feet, stood with hands clasped over the pick-handle in front of him, and his head bowed.

"At last! at last! after long years of hope, struggle and sorrow, it has come at last.

"Here, beneath my feet is a fortune, ay, fortunes, with which I can right a wrong and clear from my name the stain upon it, the stain of defrauder, robber of those who trusted their hard-earned savings to my keeping!

"And my children! Oh, happy indeed will they be, for, besides wealth to them, the riches they deserve, will be the dishonor taken from their father's name!

"I have been a hunted man, hiding from every face that I had known in the past, and drifting from camp to camp in the hope of finding what now lies at my feet.

"God knows how I have suffered, how I have struggled and worked, and now I have triumphed!" and lifting his face, it was illumined like a halo by the sun's last rays.

"Night is coming on now, and I must return to camp, but soon after dawn I will be here again, here at my mine, and I will cut my name deep in the solid rock above it.

"I will build me a cabin there on the hillside by that bubbling spring, and out of the generous earth I will quickly dig the sum due those unfortunates, with full interest to date, and send it to the bank for them.

"Then, when my honor is cleared, I will dig a fortune for my children, Heaven bless them!"

So saying the old miner shoveled the loose earth back into the hole under the cliff, and shouldering his rifle started down the gulch which led into a broad, deep canyon, with towering hills upon either side.

Darkness was rapidly approaching, and the howl of the wolf and the hoot of the owl could be heard on the hillsides; but caring nothing for these the man walked briskly along, leaving the canyon where it entered a broad valley, and taking a slightly defined trail that bordered the banks of a swiftly flowing stream.

It was now night, and a couple of miles down the valley glimmered a hundred camp fires, the

distance causing them to look like as many fire-flies.

The valley was one of grand and picturesque beauty, for towering mountains sheltered it beyond the range of vision, and the stream, looking in the light of the new moon like a silver cord, wound its way as far as the eye could reach.

With prompt step the miner walked along, unmindful of the beautiful scenery, so occupied were his thoughts upon his good fortune.

At length he reached a scattering settlement of miners' cabins, and going up to one small, humble structure, hardly ten feet square, he put a key into the padlock, opened it and entered.

This was the old miner's home in what was known as "Gilt Edge City."

### CHAPTER II. THE MINER TRAMP.

THE place bearing the high-sounding title of Gilt Edge City was but a succession of mining-camps, running along the valley for several miles.

Through the "city" ran the Overland stage trail, connecting more distant camps and other trails with a Western town of some prominence, which had sprung into existence merely as an adjunct to the gold regions.

Several hundred cabins, from the size of the old miner's ten-foot-square shanty to extensive ones with four rooms and a covered hallway, with a score of rudely-built "stores," where everything needed on the border could be bought, drinking-saloons *ad libitum*, and an extensive structure, called by compliment the Barracks Hotel, from the fact that it had once been a fort, was what comprised Gilt Edge City proper.

To this must be added the denizens of the place, the "people" that went to make up the community, and who were of all shades and complexions, pale-face, red-skin, Chinese and negro, with as many nationalities represented among the whites as there were creeds.

Armed to the teeth at all times, greedily seeking for gold, many of them fugitives from justice, sharpers, harpies, gamblers, thieves, and honest men, most of them reckless, numbers desperate unto death, Gilt Edge City was only a place for a brave man to dwell, and one who did not fear to carry his life at the muzzle of his revolver or point of his knife.

One afternoon the Overland stage rolled up to the door of The Barracks, as the "hotel" was called for short, and a passenger got out who was a stranger in those parts, for no one seemed to know him.

He was in miner's dress, a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-faced man, with long black beard and hair, and the look of one who would promptly use the weapons in his belt, if called on to do so.

He gave his name to the landlord as Richard Ford, and hinted in his quiet way that he was a tramp miner, drifting through the mining country to find where he could strike it the richest, and had "dust" to pay his way, while he was called, by those who had had the pleasure of his intimate acquaintance, Deadly Dick.

Landlord Champ was a man of great perspicacity, and knew his man at a glance.

He had failed in the hotel business in the East, and had sought a fortune in the mines; but, disappointed in his anticipations in that quarter, he had fitted up the old army barracks as an inn, and was coining money as hotel-keeper in the wilds of the West.

In his long experience Landlord Champ had become a good reader of the human face, and Deadly Dick struck him as a man it would not be well to "fool with," nor was he wrong in the conjecture.

Mr. Richard Ford was given a good room, and, after a hearty supper, sat smoking his pipe on the piazza, which had been erected along the front of The Barracks, while he enjoyed the scenery spread out before him.

The Barracks were charmingly situated, and were a succession of spacious cabins built in the shape of a square, and occupying an acre in space.

They were two rooms deep, and the center had formed an assembly-ground in bad weather for the soldiers, forming a plaza, as it were.

In fact, the building was a fort, built of stout logs, and, situated upon a rise of ground, commanded a superb view of the valley in every direction.

From The Barracks on either side, following the Overland trail, stretched the cabins of the miners, the stores and other adjuncts to a border camp, ranging from drinking saloons to blacksmith shops and gambling dens.

It was Sunday afternoon, and many miners were loafing about The Barracks, or the one street in Gilt Edge City; men who were "too good" to work on the Sabbath, so spent the time in drinking and playing games for money.

The landlord got a chair and drew it near his guest, who was wrapt in admiration at the scenery, and said:

"A grand view, landlord, from here."

"Yes, sir, it is a grand view, and the site was

well chosen for a fort, as it proved, for there was a hard-fought Indian battle around it years ago."

The landlord saw his guest start, and wondered if it was the story of the Indian fight that affected him; but his eyes were fixed upon an old miner who just then passed by The Barracks, going at a brisk step down the valley.

"Say, landlord, who is that old man?"

Deadly Dick asked the question almost excitedly, and still kept his gaze upon the miner.

"Do you know him?"

"I asked you who he was," was the sharp reply.

"That is why I asked you if you knew him, for I don't know who he is."

"Don't he live here?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been in these mines?"

"I should say nearly two years."

"Don't you know his name?"

"No more than that the boys call him Judge, on account of his learning, for there is nothing he isn't posted upon."

"I see; and they call him Judge?"

"Yes, pard; jest that an' nothin' else."

"Never heard any other name for him?"

"No, sir; never heard it mentioned."

"He is mining, of course?"

"Yes, pard, and they do say he has struck it rich the past month or so."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; in fact I know he has, for he has sent sixty thousand off on the stage-coach the past six weeks, so Ribbon Rob, the Overland driver, told me, and it got safe through, too, to them he sent it, and I am right glad of it, for he's a fine man and getting along in years; but did you think you had seen him before?"

"Well, his face crossed my mind as one I had seen before; but I guess I'm wrong. Does he live near here?"

"His cabin is one of the first in the camps, and an humble place it is; but then, it is comfortable within, for he has books, and he draws like an artist, and plays the violin, too."

"He has little to say to any one, but is always polite to all, and keeps to himself, never drinking or joining the boys in a game."

"He is a rich old man, then?"

"Yes, and kind-hearted, too, for if anybody is wounded or sick he goes and nurses them, and the boys say he is so pious he goes out to his mine and has prayer every Sunday all by himself."

The miner smiled a strange sort of smile, which the landlord did not exactly like, and shaking the ashes out of his pipe he arose and said:

"I guess I'll take a walk through the camps, landlord."

So saying he left The Barracks and walked away in the direction which the old miner had taken.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN DETECTIVE.

THE "Judge," as the miners of Gilt Edge City called him, was seated in his lonely cabin some evenings after the arrival of Mr. Richard Ford as a guest at The Barracks.

He was engaged in reading by the dim light of a candle, though the cheerful fire burning upon the broad hearth, for the nights were growing cold, sent a ruddy glow throughout the room.

Though humble looking without, the cabin was certainly pleasant within.

A cupboard stood upon one side of the fireplace, and near it a small, stationary table, beneath which were some cooking utensils, all clean and neat-looking.

A stout box, made into a chest, was in the opposite corner, and in the rear was a bunk, containing a fine straw bed, blankets, a pillow, and even sheets and pillow-cases.

Over the door hung a rifle on brackets, and stags' horns, a dressed bear's head, some wild-cat, wolf and fox-skins adorned the walls.

A shelf with books, with a lid to let down and serve as a desk to write on, a few clothes hung on pegs, some excellently well-drawn pencil-sketches, two windows, a large easy-chair, with a shelf on the back posts for a candle, and a huge bear-rug on the floor for the feet to rest on, and you have the little home of the old miner.

The rippling of the rushing waters of the stream, not ten feet away, reached the ears of the miner as he sat in his chair, and the wind whistling without and sighing among the sheltering pines made it seem most comfortable within.

Supper had been over some little time, and the miner was passing away the evening with his book.

But, suddenly, he failed to turn over the leaves, and his attitude was that of a man lost in deep meditation.

"And the dark clouds of my life have at last a silver lining," he said aloud, "for I have sent payment to those who lost their all, and a few more months of struggling, of toil, will enable me to return a rich man."

"Not for myself am I working now, but for



my children, and gold that I find here will enable me to buy back my old homestead and live as once we did.

"Ah, me! how long will be the winter days and nights until that happy time— Ah!"

He uttered the exclamation as a knock came upon his door.

He received few visitors, and the loud rap had startled him.

"Who is there?" he asked, with the caution born of constant danger, and he approached the door with his hand upon his pistol-butt.

"Judge, I have come down to see you on a little matter, sir," said a voice without.

"Who are you, friend?"

"Landlord Champ sent me."

"Ah!"

The door was opened and a man stepped in.

He wore a cloak and a semi-military suit of clothes, with a slouch hat, top-boots and spurs.

His face was heavily bearded, and that, with his collar and slouch hat, completely concealed his face.

"I don't think I know you, friend," said the old miner, closing the door to keep the wind from blowing out the candle.

"But sit down, for you are welcome," he added.

The stranger threw himself into the large easy-chair, and the Judge took the only other one there was in the cabin.

"I know you, sir, though, for I have been on your trail now for five years."

The words were spoken quietly and sternly, and the miner turned pale, as from his lips came the words:

"In God's name, who are you?"

"Hold on, Judge! don't get your hand in the neighborhood of that revolver, for I have not been such a fool as to come here alone—there are pards of mine outside."

"Who are you?" again demanded the miner, and his voice was hoarse and hardly audible.

"I am one of the Rocky Mountain detectives, Judge."

"A detective?" gasped the miner

"Yes, sir."

"And why do you come here?"

"For you."

"Of what do you charge me?"

"Of fraud."

"Oh, God, have mercy upon me!"

"Heaven may be merciful to you, sir, but I cannot, for I have come for you," was the stern rejoinder.

"Come for me?"

"Yes, see!"

He held up a pair of handcuffs as he spoke.

The miner's face dropped into his hands, and he groaned aloud, while his whole frame shook with emotion.

At last he said, looking up quickly:

"I owe no man anything, for I have sent every dollar that was due, ay, and with interest at that."

"What you sent was never received."

"Man, how know you this?" almost fiercely asked the miner.

"You sent it, yes, and I pretended that it was for certain people you defrauded; but it was to go to your son, for his use, and yours."

"It is an infamous lie, and in your teeth I fling the lie!"

The old miner was on his feet, white with rage, and his hand was upon his revolver.

The stranger never moved a muscle, but said:

"Sit down, Judge, and keep calm, while I tell you what became of your money."

"Well, sir?" and the miner folded his arms and leaned against the chimney.

"You sent sixty thousand dollars in dust East?"

"Yes, I did; and have the proofs here that I did so."

"You gave it to Ribbon Rob, the driver of the Overland, in six different parcels?"

"Yes."

"He brought you receipts for his transfer to the other drivers along the Overland?"

"He did."

"Well, Judge, your gold-dust never got a hundred miles from your cabin!" was the smiling reply.

"In the name of God, what do you mean?" gasped the miner.

"The Road Raiders of the Rockies got every bit of it."

With a low cry the old miner tottered to his chair and sunk into it.

He seemed the very picture of despair and misery, and yet the man who had dealt him such a blow showed not an atom of compassion.

At last the miner raised his head and asked:

"Is this true?"

"Every word of it."

"How do you know?" was the suspicious question.

"Did I not tell you that I was a Rocky Mountain detective?"

"Ah!" and the old miner shuddered but asked:

"And all is lost?"

"Every dollar."

"God be merciful, for this seems more than I can bear."

"You must bear more, Judge."

"What mean you?"

"You must go with me this night."

"Go with you?"

"Yes, Judge."

"Whither?"

"To prison!"

Again the poor old miner seemed stunned by the blow dealt him; but his merciless visitor said, sternly:

"Come, Judge, you must go and at once. I have a horse outside for you to ride, so pack up what things you need."

Like one in sleep the poor miner went about his cabin, gathering up a few things which he wished to take with him.

From the chest he took some papers, and a bag containing a few pounds of loose gold, and strapping all into a double bundle, which he could throw across a saddle, he said sadly, as he glanced about the little cabin that had long been his home:

"I am ready."

"Now, Judge, take your pen, there, and write a line that I will dictate."

"Well, sir?"

"Write:

"I have gone East on important business."

"Do not disturb my cabin. THE JUDGE."

This the miner wrote word for word, and, taking it, the detective tacked it upon the door outside.

"Now, Judge, hold out your hands."

The miner shuddered and shrunk back as he saw the irons, while he cried:

"No, no, not that indignity, I beg of you."

"It must be," was the unrelenting response, and the irons were snapped upon the wrists.

"Now, Judge, we will mount and away," and, locking the door, the detective pocketed the key.

Hitched to pines near by were two horses, one of which the detective aided the miner to mount and then threw across his saddle his bundle.

Then he sprang upon his own horse and said:

"Come."

"And your comrades, where are they?"

"I have none," was the cool reply.

"Oh, that I had known you were alone, for then it would have been your life or mine!" and the words came from the old miner's white lips with the intensity of a man in utter despair.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### HOW THE RAIDER WAS RAIDED.

RIBBON ROB was just mounting his box at Jumping-Off station, preparatory to seizing the "ribbons," and sending his six fine horses along at a swinging pace the twenty-odd miles to Gilt Edge City, when there came a ringing halloo down the trail, a clatter of hoofs and two horsemen dashed into sight.

"I don't go empty, arter all, for I guess that means pilgrims for the trip," said Ribbon Rob to the keeper of the station, as he saw the horsemen coming along at a swinging gallop.

"It's a army chap, Rob," returned the keeper.

"Yas, and a nigger sojer ter boot."

"I doesn't want *him* inside ther hearse, and I doesn't want *him* on ther box with me, for niggers as has brass buttons on is too stuck-up fer me, so I guesses I'll put *him* in ther baggage-boot behind."

The two horsemen now rode up and were seen to be a young cavalry officer in fatigue uniform, and a negro soldier.

Both were well mounted and a pack-horse well-laden trotted obediently behind.

"Comrade, I would like a seat in the coach to Gilt Edge City, if you please," said the officer, pleasantly, and Ribbon Rob replied:

"You can get the whole coach, sir, for she's empty."

"So much the better forme, as I can get some rest."

"Joe, this gentleman will give you accommodations until to-morrow, I trust, and then the horses will be rested enough for you to come on to the mining-can ps."

"You can look after my man and his horses, sir, can you not?" and the officer handed to the keeper a twenty-dollar gold-piece.

"Oh, yes, cap'n, sart'in, and give 'em the best," responded the delighted station man.

"All right! Good-by, Joe!" And the soldier sprang into the coach. Ribbon Rob cracked his whip and the spirited team started off at a brisk trot on the long and dangerous road to Gilt Edge City.

"Now, what in thunder are he going to Gilt Edge fer?" thought Rob as he drove along.

"If he wanted ter be sociable like, he c'd hev rid up here with me; but them army fellers is allus stuck-up, they says."

"Wal, he's chipper enough, when all goes well; but we'll see if he won't wilt should ther Road Raiders happen ter call on me ter halt."

So thought Ribbon Rob as he went along, over hill and down valley, following a trail where it took a cool head, strong hand and a skillful one to go.

He had worked himself into real ill-humor

against his passenger, whom he saw, by looking inside, was fast asleep, oblivious of all danger from those terrors of the Overland Trail known as the Road Raiders of the Rockies.

As the coach reached the top of the ridge, some five miles from Gilt Edge City, there came a rustling of foliage on one side of the road, and a horseman dashed out and drew rein right by the coach, while sharp rung his words:

"Hands up, Ribbon Rob!"

The heavy brake was put down hard, the coach stopped short, and Rob answered with the promptness of a man who knew his danger.

"Up they go, Raider."

"Up with your hands, Raider!"

The voice was deep and ringing, and a revolver covered the head of the masked Road Raider, while the head and shoulders of the young officer leant out of the coach window.

Ribbon Rob gave a low whistle, but the Road Raider promptly raised the revolver he had leveled at the driver above his head and also his other hand.

"Give the order to your men to draw off, or they will have to get a new leader," sternly cried the soldier, in a loud tone.

"Shall we riddle the old hearse, cap'n?" came a voice from the roadside.

"No, for he has the dead drop on me," was the reply.

"Driver, go on slowly, and we will take this gentleman for company until we are out of range of his thieving comrades."

"I'll say quits now, and drop off, soldier pard, calling it square," said the Raider.

"But it is not to be square, for you are beaten at your own game."

"Drive on, sir."

As the soldier spoke he caught the bridle-rein of the Raider's horse, and continued:

"Keep your hands up or I will kill you."

Ribbon Rob drove on with a chuckle, and, led by the soldier, the Raider's horse trotted on by the coach window until a hundred yards had been passed over.

Looking back, Rob saw a group of half a dozen masked men standing in the trail gazing after the coach and gesticulating excitedly.

It was evident that they were in a quandary as to what to do.

"Halt, driver."

Rob obeyed.

"Now, Mister Road-Agent, I would serve you right to send a bullet through your heart, but I am not one to kill a man in cold blood."

"Still, I wish a souvenir of you, so will take your revolvers as a gift, while I will give you a remembrance of me, and so mark you that I will know you if we meet again."

With his words he took the revolver from the Road Raider's hand, and another from his belt; then, suddenly, he threw his own weapon to a level and fired.

A shriek broke from the Road Raider's lips as a bullet cut through the palm of his upraised hand, while stern came the command.

"Now go!"

Away bounded the horse with his masked rider, while Ribbon Rob cracked his whip and sent his team flying along the trail, at the same time laughing until the mountains rung with echoes at the way in which the Road Raiders had been beaten at their own game.

If the masked robbers had any idea of following the coach and seeking revenge, they gave it up, and Ribbon Rob dashed up to the door of The Barracks without further trouble.

Springing to the ground from his box, Rob threw open the stage door, an honor that he was never wont to show to the passengers within, unless they were distinguished personages.

"Pard, yer uniform shows yer ter be a soldier, and I doesn't know yer rank or yer name, but I do say you is the all-firedest coolest man I ever seen, when it comes ter deadly music, and you did the primest thing I ever see done when yer marked thet Road Raider chief, Cap'n Brass, as we calls him, and jist borrered his guns so neat."

"I'd like ter grasp yer hand, sir, and be proud of it, ef yer is willin'."

All this was addressed to the soldier, who had sprung out, and listened to Ribbon Rob's words with a pleasant smile.

"Certainly, my friend, and I am glad to know you."

"Permit me to present you with one of the revolvers I took from Captain Brass."

Rob was delighted, accepted the gift, grasped the hand of the soldier, and, as he led him into the hotel, said to the landlord, who advanced to meet them:

"Pard Champ, allow me ter interdooce my friend, and I'll say fer him he are ther *manniest* man I ever see, fer he jist marked Cap'n Brass fer life, and tuk his guns away fer keeps."

"I am glad to meet you, sir, but I did not quite catch your name," said the landlord.

"My name is Earl Gaston, sir. I have come to Gilt Edge City to enjoy myself as best I can through the mines. My servant and horses will arrive to-morrow, and until I can get settled I would like to remain with you."

The words were spoken in a frank, off-hand manner, and the landlord was as pleased with his guest as Ribbon Rob had become.



While the soldier was taken to his room by the landlord, Rob went into the "center of attraction" at The Barracks, viz.: the bar-room, and soon told his story of the affair with the Road Raiders, and thus it was that Earl Gaston, as he called himself, made his *entrée* into Gilt Edge City as a hero.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE DARLING OF DESTINY.

"HIM? Does yer mean *him*, pard?" and the speaker pointed over his shoulder to indicate a certain person not far away.

"Yas; who is he?"

"Don't you know who *he* is?"

"No, I don't."

"You hain't been round Gilt Edge City ther past month then, pard?"

"No; I has been prospectin' in ther mountains."

"Oh! that means whyer doesn't know *him*," and a jerk of the speaker's elbow indicated the person referred to.

"No; who are he?"

"We calls him ther Darlin' o' Destiny."

"Ther Darlin' o' Destiny?"

"Yas."

"What am that?"

"It are one who carries a full hand every time, kin play trumps on ther call, kin pick up a stone and find gold in it, kin ride ther trail smilin', while fellers a leetle behind gits shot fer him, kin be stopped by road-raiders and jist take 'em in at their own game, while, when it comes to shootin', he hes a gun that puts bullets right whar he tells 'em ter go."

"That are what a Darlin' o' Destiny is, pard, and thet man yonder are ther Darlin'."

The one referred to by the speaker stood a dozen paces away, at the corner of the piazza of The Barracks.

There were scores of men moving about in the bar, on the piazza, in the hallway, and others, like the two in conversation, out under the shelter of a large tree.

The Darling of Destiny, as the enthusiastic miner had called him, was a man of superb physique, set off by a handsome fatigue uniform that fitted perfectly.

His pants were stuck in stylish cavalry-boots, the heels of which were armed with gold spurs, while neat chains crossed the high insteps of the small, shapely feet.

His waist was small, but under the fatigue jacket there was a suspicion of a belt-of-arms, though no weapons were visible.

The shoulders were broad and indicative of strength, and the head haughtily poised upon his neck.

A white silk shirt, with a black scarf beneath the collar, gave him a free-and-easy air, and a slouch black hat was encircled by a cord of gold, while a pin of crossed swords looped it up upon the left side.

Six feet in height, standing firmly upon his feet, and his movements graceful and yet quick, Earl Gaston was a man to admire among men for his physique, while his face would win a second glance from any woman.

It was full of manly beauty, from its perfection of features almost effeminate; but the stamp of manhood was there, indelibly fixed and featured.

His eyes were brown, and intensely full of animation, while his hair and long, silken mustache were a shade darker.

A month had Earl Gaston been in Gilt Edge City, and, as the reader knows, he came there as Ribbon Rob's hero.

Since the day of the Road Raiders' attack, the coach, for some reason, had gone through unmolested, on its semi-weekly runs.

The day after the Dragoon's coming—for the landlord said that he was a dragoon officer, he knew—the negro soldier arrived, his master's horse and the pack-horse following him.

The negro wore a uniform with cavalry trimmings, and yet openly showed no belt of arms, though a saber hung at his side.

His master's gold-mounted sword hung to the saddle-horn of his handsome military saddle, with its holsters, in which were two large revolvers.

A lariat also hung to the broad saddle-horn, so that the officer, if officer he was, was thoroughly armed and equipped.

The three horses were noble animals, and all of them were jet-black.

The negro was almost a giant in size, being fully six feet four inches, and his horse was correspondingly large.

His uniform was of the same style as his master's, only the trimmings were of yellow braid instead of gold cord, and a yellow cord was about his huge black sombrero.

No indication of rank was on either the Dragoon's or the negro soldier's uniform, so it was only conjecture as to who and what they were.

The Dragoon had registered as Earl Gaston, and had put his colored companion down simply as:

"Hannibal."

More than this no one knew, other than that Landlord Champ hinted that they belonged to the Black Horse Dragoons, an organization

which he asserted was attached to the United States Army.

The day after his arrival the Dragoon went out for a ride, accompanied by Hannibal, and his object, as announced, was to purchase a mine.

For a week or more he made his daily pilgrimages, and, disregarding all advice, he, to the surprise of all Gilt Edge City, purchased, for a good sum, an old, played-out lead, from a miner who was poor and had lost a leg.

All said the mine had been worked out long ago, and that the crippled owner would have sold it for a hundred dollars, any time; but the Dragoon gave a thousand in cash, and then hired some men to build him a substantial four-room cabin and shelter for his horses near it.

The Bad Luck Mine, as it was called, was situated most picturesquely in a nook of the hills from whence the whole valley and all of Gilt Edge City could be seen, and, as there was plenty of good water and fine scenery, it would not prove a bad abiding place in the cosey new cabin that the Dragoon was having put up.

A few days after his purchase, the Dragoon, who was examining the mine, struck a rich vein of ore, and all Gilt Edge City was wild over his luck.

A bully, who asserted that the Dragoon *knew* the fact before the purchase, and had cheated the poor cripple, was thrashed with a promptness that fairly paralyzed those who saw it, and a comrade of the desperado, who "drew to kill," as he expressed it, was shot through before the words had hardly left his lips.

Bad Luck, the former owner, and a good but unfortunate fellow, was then installed as keeper, as a proof that the desperado had spoken falsely in the charge he had made against the Dragoon.

Such was the man who had appeared in Gilt Edge City, six months after the carrying off of the old gray-haired miner, by the Rocky Mountain Detective.

The one who had asked the questions regarding Earl Gaston, which open this chapter, was a tall, ungainly fellow, armed to the teeth, and with the face of a person who would do and dare anything.

Having had his questions answered, he regarded the Dragoon a moment in silence; then turning to two men who stood not far distant, nodded to them to approach.

Instantly they came to his side.

"Pards, yonder man is our game," he whispered.

"Yes."

"You loaf along after me, and I'll go up and capture him."

"All right."

The leader, ascending the piazza, sauntered up toward the Dragoon, and suddenly leveling his revolver full at him, cried in a loud voice:

"Hands up, pard, to a Rocky Mountain Detective!"

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE DETECTIVE AND THE DRAGOON.

WHEN the words of the man, who proclaimed himself a Rocky Mountain Detective, fell upon the ears of all about the barracks at the time, a silence like death followed.

The Dragoon at once became the cynosure of all eyes, for they saw that he was covered by the revolver of the detective, who was now seen to be a stranger in Gilt Edge City.

Behind the detective two other strangers now appeared, and the three men grouped close together confronting the handsome young soldier.

The latter turned at the ringing words, a smile hovered upon his face, and in the pleasantest manner possible he asked:

"My dear sir, of what am I accused?"

"That is none o' yer business, but it's mine to put the nippers onter yer an' take yer ter jail."

"Suppose I make it my business to know, before I submit to arrest?" was the calm query.

"I has you covered, and if you don't hold out your flippers for the irons pretty quick, I'll put a bullet through your heart."

"Then you have orders to take me dead or alive?"

"I has."

"And you are an officer of the Rocky Mountain Detectives?"

"I am."

"Who were you told to arrest?"

"You."

"And who am I?"

"The man I wants, and is going to get," was the rude reply.

"What is my name?"

"That don't matter."

The Dragoon's pleasant smile still lingered upon his face, while he said:

"Can't we compromise this matter in some way?"

"No, I wants you, so out with your hands for the irons."

The Dragoon glanced calmly into the muzzle of the revolver, and then at the two men who stood just behind the detective, and who had their hands upon their revolvers, while one held a pair of irons.

They leant upon the piazza railing, and stood

so as to cut off all retreat by a leap, should the Dragoon contemplate it.

The crowd, with the instinct of men who knew what a bullet would do, had shrunk away from the pistol-range, and men grouped across the piazza on both sides, while others stood out upon the ground, six feet below, looking up.

A perfect stillness rested upon all.

Having taken his hasty glance the Dragoon seemed to have made up his mind that the odds were against him, for he sighed and said quickly:

"You hold the winning cards, pard, and if I must submit, I must."

He held out his hands as he spoke, and the man who had the irons stepped forward to clasp them on.

But, quick as a flash, up flew one hand, knocking the weapon from the grasp of the detective, straight out from the shoulder flew another, driving the fist hard in the face of the man who held the irons, and, before any one knew what had happened, or how it occurred, the three men were grasped, seemingly together, there was a crashing of the rail and they went headlong from the piazza to the ground.

Then, standing on the edge of the piazza, with a revolver in each hand, the Dragoon called out:

"Stay where you are! The man who moves, dies!"

There was no mistaking the Darling of Destiny now, for his face showed that he was aroused and in a deadly humor.

The three men were all hurt by the fall: one had an arm broken; but they seemed fairly stunned with amazement at their defeat, and looked bewildered.

But their hearing was good, and they obeyed the command given them, lying still as they had fallen.

A shrill whistle from the lips of the Dragoon brought Hannibal at a run.

"Yes, sah," he said, as he saw the situation at a glance.

"Disarm those gentlemen, Hannibal."

The order was obeyed, and with no apparent gentleness.

"Now, get your horse, take their arms, and escort these gentlemen one mile out of town."

"If they get ugly, shoot them; but if not, let them march on ahead, leave their weapons in the road, call for them to come back and get them, and you return home."

"Yes, sah."

The crowd laughed, while Hannibal hastened off for his horse.

Some of the crowd sought to jeer the three discomfited strangers, but the Dragoon said, sternly:

"Hold! do not insult a man when he is down, pards."

A cheer for the Dragoon followed this show of heart on his part, and Hannibal returning, swung the belts of the three men on his arm and said:

"I'm ready, sah."

"Get up!"

They obeyed sullenly, while one man showed that he was badly hurt.

Instantly the Dragoon stepped up to him, and after a short examination said:

"Your arm is broken, my man. Here, Hannibal, show your surgical skill!"

Thus called upon, the negro gently stripped off the shirt of the injured man, carefully examined the arm, took from his saddle-pocket a bottle of ointment and rolls of bandages.

With some splints, which the landlord brought him, Hannibal then coolly and skillfully set the arm and dressed it, while one of the crowd shouted:

"Bully for the Black Doctor!"

That settled it for Hannibal, as far as a nickname was concerned, for he was called doctor ever after.

Aiding the injured man to mount, for the horses of the three were hitched near, the negro started them off ahead of him, while the detective called out to the Dragoon:

"It's your day to-day, my Darlin' o' Destiny, but my time will come."

The Dragoon smiled and called to Brindle the barman to set the boys up what they liked best, and they cheered him to the echo for his thoughtfulness.

## CHAPTER VII.

## THE DRAGOON "AT HOME."

THE rights or wrongs of the case of the Rocky Mountain Detective *versus* the Darling of Destiny, the denizens of Gilt Edge City had nothing to do with, nor did they consider.

They only knew that three men had attempted to capture the Dragoon, and proclaimed themselves as belonging to those terrors of evil-doers, the Rocky Mountain Detective Association; but they had declared their game and were beaten by the man they meant to take.

The Dragoon might be a defaulter, a robber, murderer, or even a horse-thief, but as they did not capture him, they did not prove their charge, in the minds of that Gilt-Edge community, and while the Rocky Mountain Detectives retired in defeat, the Darling of Destiny became a still greater hero.

Having "stood treat" for the boys, the



Dragoon announced to the landlord that, as his cabin was finished, he would move into it at once.

He packed up his traps, and by the time this was done there were heard cheers outside, which were given in honor of the return of the "Black Doctor."

Hannibal wore the honors quietly, but grinned with delight when he told how glad the three men had been to get away, and had told him that they thought the house had fallen in on them when they went off of the piazza.

Leaving Hannibal to carry the traps to the cabin, the Dragoon went into the different stores and purchased generously of all that he would need to make him comfortable, and also what stores would be needed.

These were loaded upon the only wagon in the camps and sent to the cabin, where the Dragoon, Hannibal and Bad Luck were as busy as beavers getting things to rights.

The cabin was as fine a dwelling-place as any in Gilt Edge City. It stood in the edge of a small clump of pines, while back of it towered the hills, and upon either side the sloping sides of the hills. A rough piazza ran across the front, and there were four fair-sized rooms.

In the rear was a cabin for the horses, and near it was the Bad Luck Mine, with the shanty of its former owner, from whom it took its name, a few paces away.

In making himself and Hannibal comfortable, the Dragoon did not forget Bad Luck, in his little hut, and that poor fellow had reason to feel glad that he had found so good a friend.

Hannibal was an excellent cook, and the Dragoon ate his first supper in his new home with a relish he had not enjoyed at the barracks, though mine host Champ kept an excellent hotel—for Gilt Edge City.

After supper, all being to rights, the Dragoon seated himself upon his piazza, lighted a cigar and enjoyed the repose in a silent way.

The spring sun had caused the leaves to bud forth and the mountains and hills were emerald green.

The birds sung merrily, the stream wound its silvery length along, blue smoke curled up from a hundred cabins in the valley, and along the trails leading to the hills and mountains could be seen scores of miners wending their way homeward after a day of toil.

A balmy breeze came softly up the valley, and the sun was just touching the tops of the distant mountains.

Here and there a horseman was visible riding rapidly along, the sound of some sweet-voiced miner singing a song was wafted on the breeze, while mingling with it and keeping time, were the strokes of an ax, cutting wood for the fire that was to cook the evening meal.

It was a beautiful picture, and yet under its calm loveliness how much of crime, revelry and deadliness there was, that a spark could cause to burst forth.

It was a wild, strange community that he gazed upon, and yet he had shown himself the refined, elegant-mannered gentleman to all appearances that he was, fully able to cope with just such people.

A short month only had passed, since he came to Gilt Edge City, and yet he had promptly won the name of the Darling of Destiny.

He had found gold in paying quantities, where poor Bad Luck had toiled for years to get a few hundreds' worth of the precious dust.

He had ridden out on the mountain trails one day, and some who sought to ambush and rob him, had arrived at the spot selected just after he had gone by, and, in the gathering twilight, had shot another horseman in his stead.

The man had fallen from his horse, the assassins had rushed upon him, and, believing him dead, had only then found their mistake and bitterly cursed their luck as they left him to become food for the wolves.

But he had recognized his assassins, heard from their words who it was they sought, and rising, had staggered along the trail to Gilt Edge City.

He had been helped by those he met up to The Barracks, and there, to the Darling of Destiny, he had told his story and soon after died.

Then had the Dragoon had him buried in honor, paying all expenses, and purchasing his mine, had sent the money to the family of the dead man, writing them of his death.

Reminiscences like these crowded upon the Dragoon, as he sat on the piazza of his new house, enjoying his home.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon two men going along the trail that led into the valley.

"Bad Luck!"

The clear call of the young Dragoon reached the ears of the crippled miner at his shanty, and he came rapidly toward the house.

"Well, cap'n?"

"Who are those two men going down the trail yonder?"

Bad Luck took a good look and answered:

"As near as I kin jedge, by ther backs and walks, and bein' allus tergether, they be Flush Fred and Tiger Tom."

"I think I have seen them at The Barracks."

"Likely as not, fer that is their hangin'-out place, when they hain't at ther cabin down ther valley."

"They are miners, are they not?"

"They calls 'emselves so, but they gambles and drinks more than they dig, and I guesses is more handy with keerds or a revolver than they is with shovel and pick."

"They have a bad name then, Bad Luck."

"Waal, they do say as how it is sudden death to make 'em angry, and I guess it are, for they has got a leetle buryin'-ground o' the'r own."

The Dragoon yawned, and then said:

"Bad Luck, kindly ask Hannibal to saddle my horse, for I shall ride up to The Barracks."

Ten minutes after the Dragoon rode away, and Bad Luck said to Hannibal:

"Doctor, I do believe he hev gone up to Ther Barracks to git acquainted with Flush Fred and Tiger Tom, for he wanted his horse soon as he see they went up thet way and not down toward ther cabin in ther valley."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A PAIR OF DESPERADOES.

It was dark when the Dragoon rode up to The Barracks.

Night-time was the season for enjoyment at Landlord Champ's hotel, and all was in full blast, for the day's toil was over and the miners sought such rough recreation as Gilt Edge City afforded.

The amusements were limited to gambling, drinking, boasting and story-telling, and as The Barracks was the favorite resort in the camps, the scene there was generally more animated than elsewhere in the valley.

Landlord Champ was a burly fellow, quiet in his way, with nothing of the bully about him, but capable of taking his own part, and it was his aim to keep The Barracks as orderly as possible, and he did so, when one takes into consideration that it was an utter impossibility to keep any house orderly in Gilt Edge City.

So when the Dragoon dismounted and hitched his horse at the rack, the fun had begun, and The Barracks was illuminated as brightly as poor oil and tallow candles would permit.

"Ah, captain, glad to see you. How do you like your new home?" cried Champ, coming forward and greeting him.

"Very much, and I know I shall take a great deal of comfort there."

"Don't doubt it; but, come in and have some supper, captain."

Landlord Champ always called the Dragoon captain, and in fact the miners did the same in speaking to him, though in talking of him they referred to him as the Dragoon.

"I have had supper, thank you, landlord; but let me see if I cannot pick out two of your guests here to-night, whom I saw here several times when I first came. There, those two over at that far table yonder. Are they known as Flush Fred and Tiger Tom?"

"You have hit 'em, cap'n, for those are the names they go by, and a bad lot they are."

"Dead shots I suppose?"

"Yes, and quick to use their guns and pick a fight. They never dig any gold that I know of, but they are always fixed with dust, especially Fred, who is always flush."

"Well, if I have to take the two gentlemen to task to-night, for a little matter, I hope you will forgive me?" and the Dragoon smiled serenely.

"I'll have nothing to forgive, if, as you hint, you are going to get your grip on those men; but, go slow, cap'n, go slow!"

"Thank you!" and the Dragoon entered the bar, for the two had stood on the piazza by an open window, while they were talking.

Walking from table to table, where he was greeted by the miners in a boisterous but friendly way, and returning their salutes in his frank, pleasant manner, the young soldier gradually approached the spot that he had intended.

Leaning his back against the bar he looked at the game until Tiger Tom glanced up at him.

The desperado changed color at once, but dropped his head and went on with his game, while others in the room saw that the Dragoon had some motive in what he was doing.

"He means business o' some kind, landlord," whispered a miner near the door, and Champ smiled serenely.

When Flush Fred looked up, having gotten some secret sign from Tiger Tom, the Dragoon said, pleasantly:

"How are you, Dan Sully? Been away, have you not? for I have missed you the past two weeks."

A silence fell upon all, while Flush Fred growled:

"I hain't Dan Sully, pard, as you'd know ef yer know'd me as well as yer speaks like."

"Ah! you are not Dan Sully, sure enough! I beg pardon; you are Tiger Tom, and poor Dan Sully is dead."

"I hain't Tiger Tom, nuther."

"No, I'm Tiger Tom, ef I'm wanted," and the other desperado moved uneasily.

"I beg your pardon again, to mistake you for each other, and yet it was but natural when you

are both so much alike—in disposition and pursuits.

"But how strange that I should call you Dan Sully, when I buried him myself only ten days ago, for, as you have been away, I must tell you that he was shot by mistake for me, and it grieved me deeply."

The hum of conversation had ceased about the saloon, for instinct told all that there was something of importance going on.

With almost any one else, the crowd would have gone on with their amusements until the trouble began; but when the Darling of Destiny, in his soft, pleasant way, walked deliberately into the saloon to pick a quarrel with two such known desperadoes as Tiger Tom and Flush Fred, then the interest became intense, and men held their breath to await the result.

"Now, Dragoon, I hain't interested in Dan Sully, so I don't keer ter hear about him, and no more does my pard, Flush Fred," spoke up Tiger Tom.

"You are mistaken, my friend; you are both interested in Dan Sully, for you killed him by mistake for me!"

The Dragoon had been standing leaning with his back to the bar, his elbows upon it.

It was a free-and-easy attitude, but a dangerous one, for his hands were upon his hips, and somehow he had quietly slipped them into each side pocket or his fatigue coat.

As he spoke, sharply and clearly uttering the last six words, he suddenly covered both Tiger Tom and Flush Fred with a derringer.

Tiger Tom was the more desperate of the two, while Flush Fred never provoked a shot that he feared would be fatal.

He therefore, without having a chance, so quick was the Dragoon's movement, to draw his own revolver, threw his hands above his head, dropping the cards upon the table as he did so.

But Tiger Tom did draw his weapon and had nearly gotten it up for use, when the derringer in the Dragoon's left hand went off.

The arm of Tiger Tom fell shattered to his side, his revolver dropping upon the floor; but, with a howl of rage and pain he drew his other revolver with his left hand.

Flush Fred thought that he had seen his chance to act, as the Dragoon fired on Tiger Tom; but no! the piercing eyes seemed not to have been removed from his face, and the derringer in the deadly right hand still covered him.

Seeing, in some occult way that no one seemed to understand, both how to shoot true, and yet keep his gaze upon another man, that Tiger Tom was drawing his second revolver with his left hand, the Dragoon in an atom of time had a revolver from his belt.

There was no time to call to Tiger Tom to drop his weapon, for the desperado meant to shoot, and it was who could level and draw trigger the quickest.

A second answered the question, for the Dragoon's revolver flashed and Tiger Tom did not utter a moan as he fell to the floor.

The bullet had gone into the very center of his forehead.

And again was Flush Fred foiled, for still were those dark eyes upon him, still did that large-bored derringer cover him.

So he kept his hands above his head, and the Dragoon said, in a voice that reached every ear:

"Gentlemen, before Dan Sully died he told me that he recognized the men who had shot him from an ambush. He pretended to be dead, knowing they would kill him, did they believe he lived. They cursed bitterly at their disappointment, when they found they had shot the wrong man, and poor Sully said that Tiger Tom fired the shot, and Flush Fred was his companion."

"Now Tiger Tom is dead, and Sully is avenged; but this gentleman, Flush Fred, I shall give until noon to-morrow to settle up his affairs and get out of Gilt Edge City."

"At one o'clock I shall go through the camps on a hunt for him, and if he has forgotten to leave, there will be trouble."

"Brindle, set up drinks all round, and have Tiger Tom buried at my expense, please."

So saying, the Darling of Destiny wheeled on his heel, as though utterly fearless of Flush Fred, and walked out of the saloon, while the crowd called lustily for their drinks, and in the confusion Flush Fred slipped out of the bar-room.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE DRAGOON RECEIVES A LETTER.

"I CONGRATULATE you, captain."

So said Landlord Champ as the Dragoon walked out into the large hall of the hotel.

"I hope not upon taking human life, landlord, for God knows it goes against me to have to do so," responded the Dragoon, sadly.

"No; but upon getting out of a very perilous position so cleverly, and upon ridding the camps of two such fellows."

"Yes, there is something in that."

"I declare, when you pressed the two there about Dan Sully, I would have bet big odds against your being alive now."



The Dragoon laughed, and the landlord continued:

"Why, the boys were so interested they did not hear the stage come in."

"Ah, Ribbon Rob was on the box, of course?"

"Yes; and he saw all through the window. He has gone to the stable to get his coat in which he has a letter for me."

"I would like to see him, so will wait."

Just then in came Ribbon Rob, and seeing the Dragoon he sprung forward and grasped his hand, while he said:

"I seen it all, pard, and I'm blest if I don't feel chills down my back yet, when I think how sure I was they'd down yer."

"I was a leetle too far off to risk a shot; but I said my leetle prayer thet ef they did tarn up yer toes, I'd find funeral meat, too, for I meant ter chip in ag'in' them fellers, sarti'n as shoot-in'."

And all who knew Ribbon Rob were certain that he would have avenged the Dragoon, or lost his own life.

"Well, Rob, it's all over, and I was going home, for I am keeping house now; but I waited to see you, as I wanted to have you come to see me your very next day off in Gilt Edge City."

"I'll be thar; but, hold on, Pard Dragoon, for I has a letter here for ther landlord, and I knows something as to what it is, fer old Red Hearse Harry o' the other end o' ther line told me."

Ribbon Rob handed out the letter to the landlord, who hastily opened and read it.

His face lighted up, and he called Rob and the Dragoon into his private office.

"See here," he said with more excitement than was his wont, "I've got a letter here from Hal Burt, my old clerk East, and who now runs a hotel in Bedrock City, and he says there is a mining gent there who wants to invest in the gold diggings where there is a hope of getting dust, and he has recommended him to come here."

"He is coming here in a couple of weeks and wants me to get him a cabin, the best in the town, and make all snug, and he don't mind expense, and will have his family with him."

"This hain't no wimmen's paradise, pard, and I s'pose family means female folks," said Ribbon Rob.

"Yes, but we must make Gilt Edge City a place where ladies can live, and be welcome, and the Dragoon here has begun the good work of making it so, pretty well; but Hal says also that the gent has got loads o' money, is a fine fellow, and must have the best, and I'm to get the house at once and he'll get Red Hearse Harry to notify you what trip they will come through on."

"All right, Champ; I'll be on hand any time; but, whar is your cabin?"

"How would the quarters do over on the hill beyond, which they say was the first fort in the valley before The Barracks were built?"

"It's a pretty spot, and the cabins is large; but, they needs fittin' up considerable."

"Yes, but I could put twenty men at work there, and they'd soon fix it up prime."

"It is a pretty spot, as Rob says, and the buildings are in very fair order and can soon be made most comfortable."

"I thought of going there myself, until I bought the Bad Luck Mine," said the Dragoon.

"Oh, there's room enough there for two dozen folks, and to spare; but does yer think they would mind ther close neighbors?"

"There are none within a half-mile to disturb them, Rob."

"No, them as is near won't disturb 'em, for they is most peaceable-like, though folks do say they stirs round o' nights considerable."

The Dragoon laughed heartily and said:

"Landlord, Ribbons means the graveyard."

"Ah! the Rock of Ages?"

"Yas, landlord, ther Rock o' Ages is a short quarter of a mile from the old fort."

"That I do not think will be any objection," said the Dragoon, who remembered that the burying-ground of Gilt Edge City bore the name of "Rock of Ages Bone Garden."

So it was decided that the landlord should fit up the fort for the strange family, and the Dragoon was rising to depart, when Ribbon Rob said:

"Pard, I had forgot that I bes a letter for you."

"For me?" and the Dragoon seemed really surprised.

"Yas, pard, I got it on the way over ther ridge, and it was give to me by one o' them tarral Road Raiders."

"Here it are, and he galloped and handed it to me, sayin':

"Jist give thet to ther Dragoon."

The soldier took the crumpled note and saw that it was addressed:

"To

"THE DARLING OF DESTINY."

Opening it, he read, while a smile rested upon his fine face:

"ROCKY RANCH.

"SIR DRAGON:—You gave me a mark for life, as you said, to remember me by.

"I warn you that I will bring myself to your remembrance before the snow falls for I am not one to forgive or forget.

BRASS

"Chief of Rocky Mountain Road Raiders."

Handing the letter to the landlord and Rob to read aloud, the Dragoon said good-night and was soon on his way to his cabin home.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE THREAT.

THE day following the incidents related in the foregoing chapter, came dark and stormy.

A beating rain was driving through the valley, and heavy clouds overhung the mountain-tops, causing all to seem drear and gloomy.

Many of the miners did not take their daily tramp to their mines, and consequently found relief indoors in the saloons, stores, or their cabins.

The Barracks was crowded, as also were other public places.

The general topic of conversation was the scene at The Barracks the night before in which the Darling of Destiny had met two of Gilt Edge City's worst desperadoes.

He had promptly ended the career of Tiger Tom, and Brindle had seen to it that the body was ready for burial at an early hour.

Flush Fred came and claimed the weapons and effects of the dead man, and followed him to his grave in the Rock of Ages Cemetery along with a dozen more.

Then Flush Fred had gone alone to his cabin and allowed Brindle to pay his pard's funeral expenses with the money handed to him for the purpose by the Dragoon.

Such was Flush Fred's friendship, however, for the defunct Tiger Tom.

The citizens had by no means forgotten that the camps were expected to lose the companionship of Flush Fred.

They had heard the order given him to march, by the Dragoon, and they were on the "anxious seat" to know whether he would march or stay to face the alternative.

They all knew that Flush Fred was a very dangerous individual, more so than had been Tiger Tom.

He had asked some if they thought he looked like a man to go at another's bidding, and those questioned frankly confessed that he did not.

"I am not that kind, pards, and when it comes to a question as to who shall stay here, him or me, you'll find Flush Fred remains."

So he had said.

Would he back-up his words?

And he had said so at the funeral of his friend, in the chill of the early morning, and in a driving rain.

So Gilt Edge City was curious, from end to end, to know how it would all pan out.

Seeing that he had ample time before noon to look over the fort as a prospective home for the strange family, Landlord Champ donned his storm clothes, mounted his horse and started, muttering to himself:

"I must be back by noon, for that fool Flush Fred is boasting and means mischief."

The fort consisted of one large six-room cabin built of stout logs.

There were three rooms on either side of what was a wide passageway in summer, but in winter the ends were closed up, and with doors and windows made a hall.

The rooms were large, well ventilated and comfortable.

Upon three sides had been built a shed piazza.

Then there were half a dozen single-room cabins back in the rear a hundred feet, and around all, inclosing a space of a couple of acres, was a stockade wall some seven feet in height.

It was on a foothill, at one side of the valley, with a high range of mountains overhanging it, and with a delightful spot with an extensive and picturesque view.

The whole of Gilt Edge City was seen from there, and rumor had it that a young officer had been sent there in the valley to establish a fort, and had just completed it, when his commander came with his force and showed him that Indians could hide in the mountains towering above, and, with long-range rifles kill every man in the stockade.

So Fort Folly was given up and The Barracks were built and stocked, the stockade being removed, however, when Gilt Edge City became a mining-camp.

The landlord found Fort Sully in such good condition, that he knew a dozen men could put it in first-rate order in a few days, and he returned to send the men at once to work upon it.

But not a man would leave the town that day, as all knew now that Flush Fred had decided to remain, and they wished to see the result of the Dragoon's hunt for him in the afternoon.

Having come to this determination, Flush Fred went into training for the ordeal.

He cleaned up his revolvers and Tiger Tom's and buckled his belt on with the four ready for use.

A bowie-knife also was in the belt, and thus converted into a walking arsenal, the desperado determined to fill himself with a little artificial courage.

To do this he began to parade through the camps, stopping at places where beverages were for sale, and always generally treated the crowd.

As he had not killed Dan Sully, and Tiger Tom who had, had gone to his last sleep, the crowd did not make it their quarrel with him, but waited to see how cleverly the Dragoon would carry out his threat, or fail to do so.

If Flush Fred killed the Dragoon, then he knew his fortune was made, and it was worth the risk, for if he failed he had to go forth a wanderer upon the earth.

In the mean time the Darling of Destiny was devoting the rainy morning to looking over his mine.

He found, by examining with the eye of one who seemed to understand such things, that Bad Luck had struck three "leads," and all of them had proven false ones, or rather hardly panned out a living, but while Bad Luck had missed the real gold-vein, he, the Dragoon had discovered it.

"It is not a bonanza, Bad Luck, but it will pay pretty well, and you can work it for me on shares, so you can lay up a support for your old age," had said the Dragoon, and leaving the delighted miner at work, he had gone into the cabin to eat his dinner, which Hannibal had ready for him exactly at noon.

"I have an engagement at one, Hannibal, so have my horse ready, please," he had said.

When noon came Flush Fred was at fever heat.

The wetter he got without, the dryer he seemed to be within, and he had "steamed up" on bad rum to a condition that fitted him for any deed.

Still he had a cool head and steady nerve, when it came to a life or death shooting tournament, and he kept a weather eye open to the fact that he was expecting some one.

He had made his way through the camps, a crowd of hangers-on at his heels, who drank at his expense and praised him for a terror.

At last he reached The Barracks.

A large crowd was there, and some reckless spirits greeted him with a cheer, when they saw that the Dragoon's threat had not caused him to leave Gilt Edge City.

"Come in, pards, all of you, and have a drink. It is my treat all round, and I tell you that I am in Gilt Edge City to stay."

The crowd yelled and all pushed into Brindle's domain.

Suddenly some one called out:

"The Dragoon's coming!"

There was a general stampede, and Flush Fred rushed out upon the piazza, a revolver in each hand.

It was pouring in torrents, but there came at a gallop, right up to the door, the splendid black horse, and upon his back the cloaked form of his rider, his head bent to keep the driving rain from his face.

"Ha, Pard Dragoon, I am here, and I'm here to stay!"

"Now it's war to the death!"

Flush Fred fairly yelled the words, and as he uttered them he opened fire.

The head was raised, the black horse was suddenly reined back on his haunches, and heavily from his saddle fell the cloaked form.

A cry of horror broke from many, while Flush Fred uttered a shriek of joy.

But a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, a revolver-muzzle looked into his face, and a stern voice said:

"Flush Fred, you are my prisoner!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### MISTAKEN IDENTITY.

HAD not Flush Fred been so jubilantly gazing upon the man he had shot, lying in a heap upon the muddy ground, and with the rain beating down upon him, he would have discovered, by the movement of the crowd behind him, and the exclamation, that something was wrong.

But he took all as loud-mouthed praise of his brave act, and he was just turning to tell one and all to come in and drink his health at his expense, when a deep voice broke on his startled ear, uttering the words:

"Flush Fred, you are my prisoner!"

One look upon the speaker, and a wild cry came from his lips, his eyes started in their sockets, his face became of ashen hue and he trembled violently.

And no wonder, for before him stood the Darling of Destiny, the man he had just killed, as he supposed.

There was no mistaking that handsome, daring face, that tall, military bearing.

The Dragoon wore an india-rubber cloak and hat, and the water was dripping from them, showing that he had just come in out of the rain.

His face was very stern, the pleasant smile had gone, and his grip was like iron on the shoulder of the ruffian, while his revolver was looking full in the bully's face.

The crowd were a tounded, as was Fred.

All had seen the mounted soldier coming, and when he fell and lay where he had fallen, all believed the Dragoon dead by Flush Fred's hand.

But, there stood the Darling of Destiny himself!

Who then was the man lying out in the rain?



"Landlord, kindly guard this man," said the Dragoon; and Champ did as he was told, the Dragoon slipping the weapons from the belt of the prisoner before he left.

Then he walked down the steps and out to the fallen man.

The hand still clutched the bridle-rein, and the faithful horse stood still, but snorted with fear.

Unloosening the rein from the hand, the Dragoon led the horse to the rack and fastened him; then he went back to the rider, and bending over raised him in his strong arms as though he had been a child.

"Give me room, men," he ordered, and the crowd fell back.

He bore the form quickly along to a room, to which Landlord Champ led him, carrying Flush Fred with him.

There he laid him upon a bed, and then called out, as he glanced over the curious faces at the door:

"Buck Johnston, you, and five men you select, come in here and close the door."

The man, an honest-faced miner, selected five of his comrades, and they entered the room.

Flush Fred, white-faced and unnerved now, stood near, watching, waiting, wondering, Champ keeping his eye upon him.

The door was closed; then the Dragoon threw off his storm-coat and hat, and stepping to the bed, drew off the cloak and hat of the prostrate man. He was in cavalry uniform, and wore the stripes of a first sergeant.

He was, in person, about the size of the Dragoon, and with his mustache, being in uniform, and his face concealed by his slouch hat and collar, might readily be mistaken for the Darling of Destiny, especially as he rode a black horse with military trappings, and was coming directly toward the door of The Barracks when he was shot.

He had three wounds, for Flush Fred had fired three times.

Those wounds were in the forehead, in the neck, and in the heart, showing how deadly had been the aim of the desperado.

"He is dead, gentlemen, and any of these three wounds would have been fatal. You are a good shot, Flush Fred."

All glanced at the Dragoon as he spoke, and then at the desperado, who replied with renewed courage:

"I never misses."

The Dragoon smiled, and replied:

"You made a miss this time, for you have killed the wrong man."

"All thought it was you."

"It was a case of mistaken identity."

"A wonderful one, for I thought so myself, captain, and wondered at your reckless way of coming up, when you must have known that Flush Fred was here," said Champ.

"Poor fellow, he suspected no harm," the Dragoon returned.

"But who is he?"

"A soldier, and one of the dragoons, who was evidently bearing dispatches across country. I will see, and I called you and your friends in, as I desired that you should see all that occurred."

The Dragoon then began to search the body. He first took off the sword and belt, in the latter being a revolver.

In one pocket was found a wallet, containing some money in bank-notes, and a card on which was written:

"ROSS DUNCAN,

"1st Sergeant,

"Co. I, —th Dragoons.

"Fort McPherson."

A pocket-knife, bunch of keys, and a few other things were in another pocket, while a gold watch and chain were found in the pocket of his flannel shirt.

In the breast pocket of his coat was a large sealed package, evidently official dispatches, from the address, which read:

"Deliver with all dispatch.

"To MAJOR ALFRED TAYLOR,

"Scouting

"Bearer—Sergeant Ross Duncan, Co. I, —th Dragoons."

Nothing else was found of importance, and the Dragoon said quietly:

"Gentlemen, this soldier was doubtless bearing these dispatches from Colonel Royal's command to one of the officers on scouting duty."

"He came through Gilt Edge City as his most direct course, and unfortunately dashed up to The Barracks just in time to be mistaken for me."

"After leaving my cabin I went over to Fort Folly, by the back trail, to have a look at it, and came up to the hotel by the way of the stables, so you see how I happened to be on hand just as Flush Fred was gloating over my death, as he supposed."

"Now, I am not a man to be hard on one who makes a mistake, for Flush Fred was looking for me, and I had told him he should leave town."

"I could take him to the army and surrender him, but I will not; and I now tell him that I

give him just two hours to get out of Gilt Edge City."

"I shall have this poor soldier buried at once, and I will myself carry his dispatches, his horse and things to Major Taylor, to whom this envelope is addressed."

"I am going home to fit out for the trip, and if you are here, Flush Fred, upon my return, you or I will die. Do you understand?"

Flush Fred had expected he would be given up to the military to be tried for killing the sergeant, and he knew what that meant.

Now he saw a chance to escape, so he said:

"Pard Dragoon, you acted square with me, and I'll go."

"Now?"

"Soon as I buy a horse and git my outfit at my cabin."

"I give you two hours to do that, so be off."

Flush Fred sullenly left the room and was greeted by those outside with a yell, but he was in no humor for talking, and owning his defeat, so walked out to The Barracks' stables, purchased a fair horse, saddle and bridle, and mounting rode to his cabin.

In the mean time the Dragoon had left the body of the sergeant to Landlord Champ to bury, and with the man's traps had started homeward, leading the black horse behind his own.

An hour after he came back to The Barracks, mounted and equipped for his ride in search of the army officer to whom the dispatches were addressed.

But Flush Fred had already left Gilt Edge City, and Landlord Champ said:

"He took the road you are going, captain; so look out!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE DOUBLE AMBUSH.

THE sun was setting in a clear horizon, as Flush Fred rode along on his farewell march out of Gilt Edge City.

He had been known in the camps for a year or more, and with his comrade, Tiger Tom, had been greatly feared.

They were miners, of course, for they had their "diggings," and seemed to have struck good leads, for they always had money, especially Flush Fred, who never went broke, never asked credit at hotel or store.

He was a large man and an athlete, and his quick eye, ready hand, nerve and desperate nature made him dangerous.

He had played hard to win against the Dragoon and he had lost; so he had but one thing to do, stand up and fight it out, or get out of Gilt Edge City.

For reasons best known to himself he chose the latter alternative, and mounted upon a pretty good animal, with Tiger Tom's arms, effects and his own, and money in his pocket he departed.

He had not sold either Tiger Tom's or his own mine, and this seemed to mean that he meant to come back.

Be that as it may, he rode along the trail, the same one that the stage-coach followed, until he came to where it branched off, five miles from Gilt Edge City.

The Overland Trail led over the mountain, and the other held on up the valley.

Here Flush Fred drew rein.

"There hain't no scouting up in the mountains, I know, and this leads to where the soldiers would most likely be found. I guess this is the trail; in fact I'm sure of it."

So he turned off up the valley, which trail he knew would carry him through a gap in the mountains, ten miles distant.

Going slowly along, he was keeping a close watch upon each side, as though he was looking for a place to camp for the night.

At length he came to a mass of bowlders, upon one side of the trail, and here he halted.

"The very place," he muttered.

Then he rode on up the trail for quite a distance, leaving well-defined hoof-marks behind him in the wet earth, and then turned off suddenly into the thicket.

A flank movement of several hundred yards brought him to the rear of the mass of bowlders before referred to.

Dismounting back in the thicket, he hitched his horse securely, muzzled his head with a blanket, and then returned to the spot of which he had expressed the opinion that it was:

"The very place."

Among the rocks he then ensconced himself at ease, but in a way that gave him a rocky barrier in front and on either side, while from his position he could command here and there a view of the trail for a long distance toward Gilt Edge City.

Any one coming from that direction would be alternately in and out of sight for a mile, according to the winding and nature of the trail.

Flush Fred knew that he was beyond the furthest mine, and that there was nothing to bring a miner in that vicinity, on such a rainy day as it had been.

Getting his rifle, which he now carried, into position, he sat down to wait, while he eagerly

peered through a pine bush in front of him, at the trail, as far as he could see it.

It was growing toward twilight, when he suddenly uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

He saw some one coming along the trail.

It was a horseman, riding a black steed, and behind him trotted a led animal.

The rider was in uniform. It was the Darling of Destiny, and he was riding upon an amb-bush!

Here and there he disappeared, and as it was growing dark, Flush Fred at times almost thought he had turned back.

But no, he again saw him indistinctly, and then he settled himself for the fatal shot.

He had twice been mastered by the Dragoon, and now, the third time, it was his chance.

He had carefully cleaned his rifle, and he knew that he could depend upon it; but, should it fail him, he had his revolvers, and they never failed.

"Can he have stopped?" he muttered. "Surely he would not have gone into camp this near to Gilt Edge City."

Then he listened and his keen ears caught the sound of hoofs.

"No, he is coming, and now is my time!"

He said the words with fierce joy, and crouched for the work before him.

Soon, in the dim light a horse and rider appeared, coming slowly along.

Then he saw that there was also a led horse.

There could be no doubt of it this time—the Darling of Destiny was in his power!

It was dark now, for, though daylight yet lingered upon the hill-tops, the shadows were deep within the valley.

Nearer and nearer came the horses, and the form of the rider was dimly revealed against the sky, yet tinged with a faint light from the retiring sun, as he rode over a rise in the trail.

"Now!"

With the word Flush Fred ran his eye along the sights, and the rifle was aimed full at the heart of the rider, now not twenty paces distant.

Then the finger touched the trigger, the flame burst from the muzzle, the leaden messenger sped on its way, a groan followed, as the two horses slightly started and the rider fell to the ground, while Flush Fred bounded from his ambush and rushed upon his victim.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A MAN'S MERCY.

BUT once before in his life had Flush Fred enjoyed the delight that he experienced as he bounded from his ambush, and that was when he had seen the cavalry sergeant fall from his horse, and believed he had killed the Darling of Destiny.

Killing him now was a greater satisfaction to Flush Fred than if he had shot him in Gilt Edge City, for the Dragoon was said to carry a great deal of money about with him.

Then his weapons were superb and gold-mounted.

He wore an elegant watch and chain, a ruby pin in his scarf of great value; he had gold sleeve-buttons, set with a ruby solitaire, and upon the little finger of his left hand was a ring with another gem of the same kind.

"I've got my revenge, and I'll get a young fortune!" cried the assassin, as he rushed forward to the prostrate form.

The steed of the Dragoon and the led horse both stood motionless, as though accustomed to the smell of powder and strange scenes.

Bending over the body, Flush Fred grasped it just as a form stepped out from behind the led horse and cried:

"Hands up, Flush Fred!"

So certain had the assassin been of his aim that he had left his rifle in the ambush, and, in his delightful excitement, had not drawn a weapon.

Now came, it seemed, his doom in the ringing words:

"Hands up!"

I have said before that Flush Fred was something of a philosopher. He never took chances when the odds were dead against him; but if the odds were on his side, he was willing to take big risks.

In this case they were wholly against him, and it did not take him an instant of time to find this out.

The man at his feet was not the Darling of Destiny, but the man who confronted him was!

A revolver looked into his eyes and not three feet distant, while it was held in a hand as firm as the rock behind which Flush Fred had formed his ambush.

Flush Fred was never more scared in his life. A second time he had made a big mistake in the identity of this wonderful man.

He felt as if he would go mad, for the silence was terrible, but that stern face and that motionless revolver were more so.

He had promptly put up his hands at the command, and was waiting for the one who held the drop on him to break the fearful silence.



His hands were above his head, and he was a pitiful sight, indeed.

"Well, Flush Fred, it was another case of mistaken identity with you."

The words were uttered in a scornful tone, and the desperado asked:

"Who is he?"

The Dragoon laughed and replied:

"I thought I knew you pretty well, and I was not mistaken, as it has turned out. I knew that you had been in great haste to get out of Gilt Edge City, and it struck me that you were aware of the road I would have to take; so I took an old uniform of mine and hat, and brought them along with me.

"I always carry a glass, and as I rode along I was watching the trail ahead. As I expected, I caught sight of you, halted at this rock; so I dismounted and stuffed my uniform with fine straw, braced it with sticks, and when I drew near here put it upon my horse. I tied my lariat to my effigy, to pull it off the saddle when you fired, and walking behind the led horse was not seen by you, in the dark.

"Is my explanation sufficient?" and the Dragoon laughed in his light-hearted way.

"And what will you do with me?" growled the baffled ruffian.

"I intend to give you another chance, for I never take a human life unless it is necessary to do so."

"What kind of a chance?"

"Well, I shall leave you here, unarmed, while I go on, taking your horse and your weapons with me.

"After I have ridden a mile I shall halt and tie your horse to a tree on the trail, leaving your weapons near. When you think I have been gone long enough to ride a mile, you can walk on until you find your horse and arms."

"But will you leave them?"

"I am no robber, and did I wish to act in bad faith to you, I would kill you now.

"But I take your horse and weapons, as I do not wish to trust you until I am well on my way, for there are side trails here that you could dodge off on and head me off."

"I wouldn't be mean enough for that, pard."

"You are mean enough to do anything; you are bad medicine, through and through. But, let me warn you never to cross my path again, for patience may cease to be a virtue.

"I broke your friend's arm last night, to keep from killing him; but he wouldn't take the hint, so I killed him.

"Now, good-night, and heed my warning," and the Dragoon gathered up his "dummy," and the desperado's weapons, and mounting his horse rode on, leaving Flush Fred standing in the trail gazing after him.

Getting his horse from the thicket he led him on, too, and after a ride of ten minutes, halted.

Hitching the desperado's horse to a tree, and placing the rifle and belt of arms by the side of it, he mounted and rode off at a rapid canter, for he was anxious to hasten on with the dispatches of the dead sergeant.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE ROAD RAIDERS OF THE ROCKIES.

IN one of the wild recesses of the mountains, and within twenty odd miles of Gilt Edge City, there was a canyon so bleak, so desolate and forlidden, that one passing there would not have thought that man would ever care or dare to invade its fastnesses.

It penetrated the very heart of a high, rugged mountain, and its lofty sides of jagged rock looked as though they were going to fall in any moment.

The canyon was a perfect chasm in the mountain, hardly a hundred feet in width, and with the rocky walls upon either side rising several hundred feet into the air, until the streak of blue sky seen at the top looked like a blue ribbon.

It was a wild and rugged valley, too, that this canyon opened upon, a valley that seemed to have been at one time the bed of a mighty river.

Through its center ran a stream, not deep, but clear as crystal, and it went foaming along like a mill-race.

Along the bank of this stream a faint trail was visible, and a horseman was slowly following it. Arriving opposite to the canyon this horseman turned into it and rode along at the same slow pace.

As he went on the canyon at times seemed almost arched over, and at one place a huge mass of rocks had fallen.

Riding around these the horseman found a narrow space, into which he rode, and a split or crevice had opened the mighty wall of the canyon, leaving a path wide enough for a pack-horse to ascend.

The ascent was steep and the man dismounted, leading his horse. It was a climb of nearly a quarter of a mile, but it led the horseman out into a pretty little valley almost in the very mountain top.

A man was seated upon a rock at the end of the path, and from his point of lookout had evidently seen the horseman when he entered the canyon far below.

"Hello, pard, I thought it were you; but

then, I didn't see how it were you was alone," said the man on the rock, and who was evidently on watch, for he was armed to the teeth, and from his appearance looked as though he might be one of a band of cut-throats.

"Yes, it's me, and I'm alone. Where's the cap'n?"

"Up the valley at his den."

"All right, I'll go there," and the man rode on, appearing as though he was not in the best of humors.

As he rode along the pretty little valley, horses were visible here and there, staked out to feed, and further on were a number of rude log huts.

Before these were men, a score in number, lying down asleep, playing cards, cleaning their fire-arms or smoking, as the humor suited them.

At the head of the valley a cabin stood alone. It was larger than the others, more stoutly built, and had a pine-straw shed in front.

A man sat in a bear-robe chair by the door, and a Chinnee was busy at a fire, cooking.

The horseman rode toward the latter cabin, saluting the men in a sullen way as they spoke to him, and dismounting and hitching his horse, advanced toward the one who sat in the bear-robe chair.

The latter was a large man, with the form of one who possessed both endurance and strength. He was dressed in a suit of gray corduroy pants, stuck in top-boots, a blue woolen shirt, and wore a black Mexican sombrero embroidered in silver thread with various designs, and in white thread, directly in front, with a skull and cross-bones.

His face was a strong one, but the strength lay rather in the way of deviltry than goodness.

Still it was a handsome face, and the gray hair on his temples showed that he had lived his two-score years.

He was armed with two revolvers, and a bowie-knife in his belt, and looked the man to use them.

One of his hands was in a sling, and it was his right.

"Well, Flush Fred, you are back soon. Anything up?" he called out as the horseman dismounted and approached him.

"Yes, cap'n, there's a good deal up."

"What is it?"

"I've come to stay," and Flush Fred threw himself upon a bench near by.

"Gilt Edge City is getting sickly, eh?" and the man smiled.

"It's worse."

"How?"

"It's deadly."

"Ah! tell me about it."

"Don't you miss some one?"

"Your second self, Tiger Tom?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Planted yesterday."

"No! Dead?"

"Dead enough to bury."

"You seem in ill-humor, Fred?"

"I am that."

"Come, out with your sorrows."

"Tiger Tom is dead, and I'm alive on probation."

Captain Brass laughed, and Flush Fred continued:

"You know after our ambush of the Dragoon, and getting Dan Sully instead?"

"Yes."

"Well, we came here, as you know, cap'n, and stayed until you sent us back to get what news we could."

"Yes."

"Well, we returned to Gilt Edge, and went up to The Barracks that night to play a leetle cards and learn what was going on."

"Well, in came the Darling of Destiny—"

"The Dragoon?"

"Yes, sir, and he just begun at once on Tom and me. He got the drop on me, so I elevated my hands in becoming style, and Tom got mad and tried to shoot; but the Dragoon broke his arm, and then Tiger tried his left, only to get a bullet in his head."

"And you?"

"That Dragoon is cross-eyed, for he never took his eye off of me, while attending to Tom."

"And then?"

"He gave me until noon the next day to get out of town, yet I stayed. It was raining, and I was that hot I meant to have it out, and so when I saw a mounted soldier dash up to The Barracks, I sailed out and let him have it."

"Killed him?"

"I did."

"Thank God!" and Captain Brass sprung to his feet in intense excitement.

"But, captain, I killed the wrong man, sure as my name is Flush Fred, and what's more, the Dragoon came in the rear door, covered me, and ordered me to leave town, so I left."

"And the man you killed?"

"Was an army sergeant carrying dispatches, who happened up at a bad time for himself."

"The Dragoon said he would carry the dispatches, so I concluded to lay for him, and I did."

"With what result?"

"I ambushed him, and hit where I aimed."

"Then he is dead?" eagerly said Captain Brass.

"No, for it was a dummy in the saddle, and he covered me, from behind his horse, and gave me more advice and let me go."

"He is a cool one! And you came here to stay?"

"Yes, cap'n, for Gilt Edge hain't healthy for me now."

"You are right; but with you and Tiger Tom no longer there I must find two more spies for the camps."

"Better send two of your own men who are strangers, for I don't know who to tackle in Gilt Edge, that I could trust."

"I'll do it, and let them go there under the best circumstances."

"I will select two, to-night; but this Dragoon certainly deserves his name as a Darling of Destiny, but we'll make his destiny for him."

"Don't be too sure of that, for he is chain-lightning, and sharper than a sleuth on the scent. But, captain, I think I could get a splendid horse for you, and one for myself, if I tried."

"How?"

"Take several of the boys by night, and run off the Dragoon's two splendid blacks, for he is away now and there is nobody at home but a negro and a cripple, old Bad Luck."

"Do it, Flush, and I'll pay you well for mine."

"I'll do it, and to-night," said Flush Fred, decidedly.

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### THE STRANGERS.

RIBBON ROB wore a worried look upon his brave, honest face.

He was standing by the door of the Overland stage station, and he knew that within an hour he must be on his run over the mountains to Gilt Edge City.

It was early in the morning, and the sun was shining brightly, while the forests near were alive with song-birds.

But neither the bright sunshine nor the music of the birds removed the shadow from Ribbon's face. He was usually such a reckless, good-humored fellow that it seemed strange to see a shade in his bright eyes.

The trouble was, Rob had a precious load to carry through the mountains. There had arrived by the coach from the East, the evening before, "the strangers," as the intended settlers at Fort Folly were called.

Rob had taken another letter to Landlord Champ, along with a snug sum of money, telling him to do all things needed for the new home, and that several wagons had started by the valley trail, loaded with furniture and accompanied by some horses and cattle, that the strangers might make themselves comfortable there.

Ribbon Rob had also received word that they would be along in time for the next run.

Somehow, Rob pictured to himself a whole family, a dozen in number, in fact a stage-load of children, and he was considerably taken aback when his partner of the ribbons drove up to the station the evening before with the strangers, and they panned out but five persons.

"Dash my buttons, thar hain't a kid in the hive," cried Rob, as he saw the five alight from the stage.

First came an elderly gentleman, a solid-looking, well-preserved man of fifty, with a fine face and hearty manner.

Then there sprung lightly out [a young girl, that caused Rob to ejaculate:

"Thet are a streak o' sunshine!"

She was hardly more than eighteen, very graceful in form, very lovely in face, and she had a wealth of golden hair which the jostling of the coach had brought down in rich confusion upon her shoulders.

She wore a close-fitting traveling-dress, and a slouch hat encircled by a small silk sash of scarlet, that was very becoming.

The next person to alight was a young girl of twenty, neatly dressed, and evidently standing in the light of half-companion, half-maid to the young lady.

A young man then alighted, with a half-lazy air—a man of thirty, well-dressed, intelligent-faced and with the appearance of a gentleman.

Then came the fifth one of the party, a meek-faced lady of forty-five, and evidently the wife of the elderly gentleman, the mother of the lovely girl.

"Now, this is primitive; but I like it, and I know I shall like our wild life in the mines," said the maiden, turning her eyes about her and then letting them fall upon Ribbon Rob, who jumped as though she had struck him.

"I do wish your good father had never consented to your mother and yourself coming to this wild region, Miss Kate," said the younger man, stepping up to her side.

"Nonsense, Mr. Varnum, you are always croaking. Father was a surveyor long years ago, became a fine prospector, and through it found a fortune in gold. He has lost heavily of



late, and has the old fever come upon him to hunt for gold again, and feels sure he can find another fortune, so he came, and mother and myself were glad to come with him, while of course I could not do without Pink, my maid, and you came as papa's secretary, you say, but really, I think, mostly to tease me.

"We are here, and there is an end of it, and I shall enjoy the change, and I know mamma's health will improve."

She spoke half-impatiently, half in a spoiled way, and Sylvester Vernon turned away after remarking:

"Your father is a rich man now, and he may lose all by investments here."

"He wishes to make me an heiress more worth struggling for," was the laughing reply.

Now Ribbon Rob had overheard this little conversation, and it gave him an idea of who and what the strangers were.

"She's a beauty, and the Dragoon will be the one to catch her eye."

"Now, then gal she calls Pink are just my style, and I'll kinder shine thar, I'm guessin'."

So whispered Ribbon Rob to himself, and he was a handsome man withal, with his fine brown beard, hazel eyes, long curling chestnut hair, that fell upon his shoulders, and his manly face.

He dressed, too, in a style that had won for him the *sobriquet* of the "Dandy Driver," and no man in the mountains could handle the "ribbons" with the skill that he did, while his courage had been often tried.

Taking his hat off and bowing low, Rob said, addressing Kate Conrad, who stood near, enjoying the fine scenery:

"I'm glad to meet you, miss, and welcome yer."

"I'm Ribbon Rob, who drives you over to Gilt Edge City to-morrow."

Now, Kate Conrad had often ridden on the box with the different drivers, and Rob was their hero, and often had she heard of him.

So she stretched out her hand and said, frankly:

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Ribbon Rob, for I have often heard of you."

"We will be friends, I know."

"I hopes so, miss."

"But I hear the most dangerous part of the road is between here and Gilt Edge City."

"It is, miss."

"Road-agents, eh?"

"They calls themselves Road Raiders, miss, and their chief is Cap'n Brass."

"Do you think we will get through all right?"

"I hope so, miss; but I know we would if the Darling o' Destiny were along."

"And who is the Darling of Destiny?"

"The Dragoon," and then Rob had his chance to tell of "his hero," and he did, for Kate Conrad heard all about the mysterious Darling of Destiny.

"He left Gilt Edge City with the dispatches, miss, and hadn't got back when I left; but I'd give my leaders if he was with us."

"Then you anticipate danger?"

"I hopes ag'in' it, miss."

"So do I, for besides his precious family, papa has a large amount of money with him."

"But I believe you will carry us through all right, Ribbon Rob."

And this is what troubled Ribbon Rob, as he stood in front of the station the next morning, for he feared Captain Brass and his Road Raiders might bring him to a halt.

But there was nothing to do but risk it, and the stage rolled away on its mountain run to Gilt Edge City, with Kate Conrad seated on the box with Ribbon Rob, who certainly did not allay her fears of an attack, by the stories he told of the perils of staging on the Overland.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### FLUSH FRED AND HIS ALLIES.

As the reader has surmised, the mountain camp into which Flush Fred wended his way, by the trail up the canyon, was the retreat of the gang of outlaws known as the Road Raiders of the Rockies.

The band had not been very long in existence, though "Knights of the Overland," in twos and threes, and singly, had made traveling dangerous.

They were generally supposed to be hard characters from the mining-camps, and, as no one knew just who his neighbor was, it caused most every one to be looked on with suspicion.

Captain Brass no one knew, other than the men of his band.

He had begun as a road-agent alone, then added a couple of men to his band, and thus on until he had a score under his command.

He had spies in the different camps and along the Overland Trail, where reports could be made to him of any valuable treasure being run through on the coaches, or by private hand.

Flush Fred and Tiger Tom had been his spies in Gilt Edge City, so that with the latter in his grave, and the former driven out of the valley camps, he had to look up others to take their place.

For some reason Captain Brass seemed most anxious to capture the Darling of Destiny.

That gentleman had left his mark upon him, as he had said, sending a bullet through his hand.

Though he would have been glad to know that the Dragoon was dead, he yet did not wish to kill him, telling his men that he preferred to take him alive, for reasons best known to himself, for why he did not state.

He had so cleverly captured him, right before his men, that Captain Brass had not forgotten the humiliation, while his hand, which he still wore in a sling, did not permit him to forget the mark he had left on him.

The band of the Road Raiders was well organized, and the will of their captain was law.

Though in one sense of the word they were "gentlemen of the road," in another they were horse-thieves, robbers of solitary miners, and in fact turned their attention to all that they could get a dishonest penny out of.

The men realized that their chief had been born a gentleman, whatever flight he might have tumbled from that position afterward, and he was a man to rule, plot, plan and execute, so they trusted him thoroughly.

Captain Brass had a great love for horse-flesh, and he had heard much of the black steeds that belonged to the Darling of Destiny.

So he was anxious that Flush Fred should carry out his intentions of running them off, as he expressed it, for *stealing them* was too harsh a term.

Fred therefore picked his comrades for the run.

He had confidence in himself, where he knew the Dragoon was not around, so he considered that two men would be all-sufficient, as a negro and a cripple were all that they had to contend with, even if, in their quiet way of horse-stealing, they disturbed any one at all.

"Negroes always sleep sound," he said to the chief, and Bad Luck, the one-legged miner, he did not seem to take into consideration.

"Who have you selected, Flush Fred?" asked Captain Brass.

"Rattler and Stonefist."

"The very men I wish to be my spies in Gilt Edge, for no one knows them there."

"I will tell them to remain, after you have gotten the horses, and they can soon get work there, and I can trust them."

"They are good men, cap'n, and as you are always masked on the road, no one has seen their faces, and I guess they'll be all right."

"Then get ready, Fred, and send Rattler and Stonefist to me."

The two men selected for the little matter of aiding Flush Fred in his horse-stealing, and then to remain in Gilt Edge City as pretended miners, and in reality spies for the Road Raiders, were both large, powerfully-formed fellows, with a profusion of hair and beard, and the reputation of being desperate parties to handle in a game of gun or knife.

Mounting their horses, and with their weapons cleaned and in their best condition, the three men set off on their ride to Gilt Edge City.

Flush Fred was the leader, and he knew the environs of the mining-camps thoroughly.

He desired to reach the home of the Darling of Destiny, as he expressed it, "About the time that nigger sleeps ther soundest."

The cabin of the Dragoon was well located for just such a raid, for it was upon the foothills of the valley, and stood off to itself, while there were near it three trails branching off into the mountains.

There had been a substantial log cabin built for the horses, and it was back toward the head of the little glen, a hundred feet from the hut of Bad Luck, and about the same distance from the main cabin.

The glen, where it opened from the hill, was about two hundred feet wide, and narrowed as it ran back to the mine.

The large cabin was nearly in the center of the glen, with pine and other trees upon either side and in the rear.

To get to the stables the horse-thieves would have to pass one side of the cabin, and, if they alarmed Bad Luck he could open on them from his hut, while Hannibal had a chance to cut them off as they went by to escape.

But Flush Fred had no fear of Bad Luck, or of Hannibal, and to get the two splendid blacks he knew were in the stable, was worth the risk he thought, for every one of the Dragoon's trio of horses were noted as superb animals, and many envious eyes had been upon them.

Had the Darling of Destiny been at home Flush Fred would never have thought of such a thing as to attempt to steal his horses.

As he was not, he would make the attempt.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE MIDNIGHT RAID.

HANNIBAL was seated in his master's cabin, busily cleaning a repeating rifle.

He had had his supper, and it was a good one, for the Dragoon always lived well; no matter where he happened to be he had the best, and Hannibal was the best of cooks.

As he sat there his fine physique was well revealed, and his face was full of strength, courage and intelligence.

His master was gone off on a perilous trip, with the dead sergeant's dispatches, but somehow Hannibal felt no anxiety regarding him.

He knew that the Dragoon was pretty well able to take care of himself.

Now Hannibal had taken a fancy to the crippled miner, Bad Luck, and the two were wont to spend their evenings together chatting, and the negro gleaned a great deal of information about the mines, and the people.

Bad Luck was well posted, and he was withal a clever fellow in his way.

He had been unfortunate as man and boy all his life.

He had lost his leg, and again his finger by an accident, and ill-fortune seemed to have dogged him.

He had married and his wife had died, and then failure in business had followed, so he had gone West to hunt a fortune.

Staking out a bit of land he took a fancy to, he had traded it off for a mine.

The mine had paid him a bare pittance, while a rich lead had been found on the land he gave up.

So it went on until he was known as Bad Luck.

But with the coming of the Darling of Destiny his luck had changed, and Bad Luck felt that he was prospering.

It is true that when he had sold his mine he got what was considered a great price for it; but the Dragoon found it a paying property and so gave Bad Luck a share in it.

It was no wonder then that Bad Luck was a warm advocate and friend of the Darling of Destiny.

He loved to talk about him, and returning from the store with a bag of provisions, he saw a light in the Dragoon's cabin, so called out:

"Have you gone to bed, Hannibal?"

"No, sah, I am cleanin' up de weepens, fer there is no tellin' in this country when you may need 'em," answered Hannibal, opening the door and inviting the miner in.

Bad Luck put down his bag and took a seat, and Hannibal got a bottle from the cupboard and the two drank the health of the absent Dragoon.

Then they were ready for a chat, and Bad Luck, began with:

"Pard Hannibal, that cap'n o' yours is a great man."

"He hain't slow, boss, that's a fact."

"He's a real soldier, I guess."

"I 'spect so, sah."

"Do you belong to the army yourself, Hannibal."

"I belongs to de army, boss, if dere was war, and there is war pretty often these times," was the non-committal response.

"Is your boss in service now, Hannibal?"

"Waal, sah, he am always doing something."

"What's his rank, Hannibal?"

"They calls him cap'n."

Bad Luck thought a moment and was convinced that he did not know any more than he did before he started the inquiries.

"He's a dead shot, Hannibal?"

"He never miss, boss."

"It's strange that such a nice gent sh'd come out here ter live."

"He likes it, sah."

"Do yer think he'll stay long?"

"I guesses he'll stay long as he wish to, boss."

Bad Luck sighed; but after a moment he tried it again:

"My opinion are that he come to Gilt Edge City fer some set purpuss."

"I heered other gemmans say the same, sah."

"He seems mighty rich, Hannibal."

"Yes, sah, he got money, I guesses."

"Waal, thar are things I intends ter do, Hannibal."

"Yas, boss."

"I intends ter tell ther cap'n about an old miner who was my friend, leastways he was good to me, though he never had much ter say to nobody."

"We called him the Jedge because he war edicated so prime, and what he didn't know nobody wanted ter larn."

"Is he here now, sah?"

"No, he left here fast fall, and very suddint-like, for he didn't tell nobody he war going, and jist put a notice up on his door thet he had gone East on business, and not to distarb his cabin."

"And he hain't come back?"

"Not yit; but his cabin hes been distarbed."

"Been robbed, sah?"

"I can't say that; but out here among the miners, a man's property is left sacred by others; but two fellers has gone to the cabin of ther Jedge and jist camped thar."

"Taken it for their own, sah?"

"Yas; and that's what r'iles me powerful bad, yer see."

"It were known ther Jedge struck it rich



afore he left, and sent plenty o' dust East by stage.

"He left a leetle bag o' dust with me twice, and it were welcome, and he told me then he'd hit it rich; but nobody knew whar his mine was, and folks felt cur'ous about it.

"Still they didn't find out, and I is afraid that it is to try and diskiver, from what ther Judge left in his cabin, thet made them two fellers pre-empt his leetle home, and I'm going to ask the cap'n to jist pay 'em a visit and know why they is thar.

"They is hard citizens, yer must know, and it hain't many folks as cares to ask 'em questions as to their business; but thet boss o' yourn will ask 'em."

"Yas, boss, and he'll git a answer, too, I reckon," and Hannibal laughed.

"You think he'll try and find out for me about the Jedge?"

Hannibal was a peculiar negro, for at times he talked in the dialect of a cottonfield hand, and again would drop it quickly and speak with the words and manner of one who had been well educated.

He was wont 'most always to talk correctly when alone with the Dragoon, but with others he appeared to be the uneducated negro.

But now he answered, in almost a different voice from his ordinary one:

"I am sure, sir, if you tell the Dragoon that the Judge was your friend, and the men took his cabin without any claim for doing so, he will inquire into it for you."

Bad Luck started, for he seemed to almost feel that another person than Hannibal had spoken to him; but he was very shrewd, and so appeared not to notice the change in Hannibal's words and manner, and said:

"Waal, they is terrors on the fight, with knife, gun or fists, and they knows what they kin do, so it makes 'em sassy.

"They is both named Bill, but Bill *what* nobody knows, so the boys calls 'em Bruiser Bill and Bowie Bill, for one is a terrible bruiser, and t'other is a fearful hand with the knife; but you tell ther Dragoon about 'em when he comes, and I'll ask him ter hunt 'em out o' ther Jedge's cabin.

"Now I must be goin' ter my roost, so good-night, pard."

Hannibal called the miner to take a night-cap, and then Bad Luck departed; but he had gone but a few steps when he called out:

"Ho, pard, thar is some one at ther stables."

This was enough for Hannibal, for he seized his revolvers, dashed out his light and was out of the cabin in an instant.

"Here they comes!" cried Bad Luck.

"Jump to cover and draw your weapon," said Hannibal, though he did not set the example of hiding himself.

There was heard the clatter of hoofs and a small cavalcade came dashing down the glen.

Hannibal understood the situation at once.

Some one had been to the stables, stolen the horses and were escaping with them; but they had to pass the cabin, he well knew.

The mounted party were dashing along, evidently feeling success certain, when suddenly a long, shrill cry was heard.

It came from the lips of the negro, and hearing it the two splendid, kidnapped black horses suddenly wrenched themselves loose from their captors, as they were being led along at a gallop, and darted off among the pines in search of the one who had given the well-known call.

"Curse the brutes, they are gone!" yelled Flush Fred, and he drew rein, as though to go in chase.

But just then a flash and report came and a bullet whistled by his ears.

This decided the desperado, especially as his two comrades were anxious to get away it seemed, as they rode straight on.

The shot had come from Bad Luck, and it was returned by both Stonefist and Rattler as they dashed along.

Then Hannibal fired and Flush Fred's horse stumbled, staggered and fell, throwing him over his head.

But Fred was on his feet in an instant, he saw that his two comrades had passed the cabin, and he darted into the pine thicket and up the steep side of the glen, only anxious to escape, for somehow the idea struck him that the Dragoon must have returned.

In the darkness, and not having seen the two blacks break away from their captors, Hannibal feared they might be ridden by the thieves, so dared not fire, and so the two mounted desperadoes got by the cabin, they firing rapidly, and Bad Luck returning it.

But as they reached the trail loud neighs were heard, in answer to another call by Hannibal, and up dashed the two blacks.

"You hold Guide, boss, and I'll pounce on Scout," cried Hannibal, and he threw himself astride of one of the animals without saddle or bridle.

Away he started in chase, and reaching the trail halted, for he did not know which one of the three the men had taken.

Listening, he heard the hoof-strokes, but the rocks caused many echoes, and the trail he took was at a venture.

Along he dashed however, and after a short ride beheld moving forms ahead, and a voice called out:

"Which way, pard, in such a hurry?"

Hannibal drew rein, for two horsemen were before him, only they had been riding toward him.

"Did you see two men on horseback, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Only ourselves, and we is bound for Gilt Edge City; how far is it?"

"A mile, sah, to the first cabin; but you didn't meet two horsemen running for all they was worth?"

"No, pard, we hain't seen any; but is you from Gilt Edge City?"

"Yas, sah."

"Why, you is a black man?"

"Yas, boss, I hain't white."

"Waal, we wants to git in afore the taverns close up, so we'll ride on."

Hannibal remained seated upon his horse, looking after them.

His hands hung on each side of him, but each held a revolver, and a movement of either of the men to draw would have been anticipated by a shot from the negro.

"I half-way believe they are the men, and are fooling me."

"If so, they belong in Gilt Edge City, and I will know all about them."

He followed them slowly, left his horse with Bad Luck to put back in the stable, and then ran on foot after the two men.

He soon came in sight of them, for they rode slowly, and after dogging their steps for a short distance saw them stop at the Gold Dust Tavern, the next public house in importance to The Barracks.

Through the window he saw their faces and heard their story how they were miners in ill-fortune, and had come to Gilt Edge City to settle.

"I was wrong, and yet I half-way suspect them," muttered Hannibal, as he retraced his way homeward.

Bad Luck had put up both the horses, and was on guard.

Getting a lantern they examined the dead horse of the desperado, and Bad Luck said:

"That's the very horse, saddle and bridle Flush Fred bought afore he left, for I seen them then."

But Flush Fred was not to be found, for he was hastening along on foot, on his way back to the retreat of the Road Raiders, perfectly furious at his bad luck, and vowing renewed vengeance against the Darling of Destiny and all connected with him.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### RIBBON ROB'S RUSE.

It will be remembered that it was with considerable dread that Ribbon Rob drove away from the station, with the strangers in his coach.

He liked the old gentleman's looks, was pleased with Mrs. Conrad's appearance, was struck by Kate's dashing way, and felt a soft spot in his heart for her maid, Pink.

As for Sylvester Vernon, he did not "freeze to him," as he expressed it, for there was something about him that he did not like.

That he had a precious load on board, Rob knew, not to speak of Mr. Conrad having a great deal of money with him.

Kate had asked to ride on the box, and Ribbon Rob was as much pleased as Sylvester Vernon looked displeased.

The stage-driver was a gallant fellow in his way, and as they rode along he entertained the maiden with stories of the road until she said, laughingly:

"If you tell me any more horrible things, Mr. Rob, I shall not be able to keep my hat on, for each separate hair is beginning to grow stiff with fright."

But the scenery was grand, the horses were fast and spirited, the road was good, but dangerous, and Ribbon Rob's masterly skill won Kate Conrad's unbounded admiration.

"We are not very far now from whar ther Darlin' o' Destiny beat Cap'n Brass at his own game," said Rob.

"Yer see, it were as I told yer, miss, upon ther ridge, and that is whar ther Road Raiders gits ther advantage."

"We has ter climb ther mountain, and then go along ther ridge on pretty level ground for half a mile."

"Then begins ther descent of several miles ter ther valley whar Gilt Edge City is."

"And how long ago was that?"

"Only five weeks; it was the first time I hed met ther Dragoon."

"He comed up to ther station on horseback, with his colored man, and left him to come over next day, for their horses were tired, and he rode with me."

"He rid inside, and I kinder took a notion he was no good; but I changed my mind when the Raiders struck us, for I tell you, miss, he proved the gamest man I ever see, and we is friends now."

"I tell yer, he is king bee in Gilt Edge City now, and I only wish he were along to-day."

"Is your pa much on ther shoot, miss?"

"Do you mean to ask if he is a man who will fight?"

"Yes; pull his gun and use it, miss?"

"Papa is a brave man, and if you advise resistance if we meet the road-agents, he will do as you say."

"And t'other one, miss?"

"Mr. Vernon?"

"Yas, miss."

"Oh, he will be ready when you need him, I am sure."

"Now, miss, if we is halted, and resist, somebody's got to tarn up his toes."

"It may be me, may be your pa, and perhaps t'other gent, while, if bullets flies thick, some o' you lady folks might feel lead, so it comes to ther question as to whether we allows 'em to s'arch ther old hearse or fight."

"Suppose you halt and ask my father?"

The halt was made, the case stated clearly, and it was decided to hide the large amount of money and valuables in some way and allow the Raiders to search them and get a few things and a small sum.

Now, Rob had a secret receptacle in the coach, an idea of his own, and in there the money and jewelry were placed, and the stage drove on.

Declining to enter the coach, Kate remained on the box.

Her face was pale, but she had nerved herself to bear any ordeal through which they had to pass.

Suddenly, and just as Ribbon Rob had whispered, "Here, if anywhere," there rung out in loud tones:

"Draw rein, Ribbon Rob!"

"Hands up!"

"Cuss yer, Cap'n Brass, don't yer see I hes leddies along this trip?" cried Rob, putting on the brake and coming to a halt, while he held his hands up over his head.

Not a Raider had been visible when the command was given, but now Captain Brass rode out into the trail, and while two of his men sprung to the heads of the horses, a half-dozen more ranged themselves on either side of the coach.

Riding near the coach, the outlaw drew rein, and raising his sombrero, bowed low to Kate, who gazed earnestly upon his masked face. He said:

"I do see that you have ladies with you, Ribbon Rob, and one who is most beautiful; but what other treasures have you?"

"Mighty little, I guesses, for folks hain't as big fools now as they was a couple of months ago."

"I believe that you have a rich booty on board, Ribbon Rob."

"I had one that was a leetle too rich fer you, some weeks ago, Pard Brass, but how's yer hand, for I wishes ter tell ther Dragoon, as I knows he'll be anxious about you."

A curse came to the outlaw's lips, and he said fiercely:

"Some day I'll meet your Darling of Destiny again, Ribbon Rob, and then woe be unto him."

"You'll find the woe in your family, Cap'n Brass."

"Silence, sir, or I'll kill you."

"No, don't kill me, for no other driver will be fool enough to run this trail, and you'll be knocked out of your business."

"Tell me who you have on board."

"I'll tell you, sir, for besides myself there are my father, mother and maid, with my father's secretary, Mr. Vernon," said Kate, fearlessly.

"And you have money and valuables, miss?"

"If you think so, it is your place to find them."

"I know so, fer I had a spy on your movements, and he saw you halt, and I know you did it to hide them; after seeing you stop he rode on and told me."

Mr. Conrad groaned and Kate turned pale, while Ribbon Rob hissed forth:

"You infernal thief o'ther road, I'd give a cool thousand ef ther Dragoon and his company c'u'd come on and catch yer now."

"I do not fear him or his soldiers for they are nowhere near."

"You fool yerself with thet idee, Brass."

"Ccme, out with all that you have hidden, and at once."

"I will never do so," said Kate, firmly.

"Come, old gentleman, life is too short to tarry here, so give up your money, or I will—"

"Would you kill me in cold blood?" sternly asked Mr. Conrad.

"I would if you provoked it; but I think I know how to strike you, and that is not through fear."

"What do you mean, Sir Robber?"

"I mean that I shall take your daughter as a hostage until you give up your gold."

"You would not dare," indignantly cried Kate.

The Road Raider chief laughed, and said:

"You are mistaken, young lady, for I dare do anything, and unless the money is forthcoming within five minutes I will take you as my captive."

"Ther things was bid back down ther road, Brass," said Ribbon Rob.



"Then you go and bring them, while these people wait here."

"Kin I ride your horse?"

"No."

"I'll see yer durned afore I go then, for it's none o' my funeral."

"Then that gentleman shall go," and he pointed to Sylvester Vernon.

Before the latter could make reply Ribbon Rob said quickly:

"He don't know whar they is, and I is the only one as does, for I hid 'em."

"Then you shall go after them."

"I'll go and git all, ef yer'll let me ride yer horse."

"Take one of your leaders."

"No, sir, I don't ride bareback."

"How far is it back?"

"Leetle over half a mile."

"Is he right, Con?" called out Captain Brass, of a man back in the thicket.

"Yes, chief."

"Then take my horse, but two of my men shall go with you."

"Let 'em go, I don't care."

Ribbon Rob gave Kate a knowing look, and dismounted from his box.

The chief also dismounted, and Rob said:

"Is yer hand gittin' better, Brass, fer I sees yer still wears it in a sling?"

"Ask no questions, sir, and go!"

"Oh! I'll go, for when it comes ter a question o' dustagin' this young leddy bein' taken by you, you honery cuss, I say give up ther gold every time, and I'll help make up ther loss, fer I hain't as poor as I look, though I knows better, Brass, than ter carry my spare change on ther road, when sich thieves as you kin git it."

"Curse you, Ribbon Rob, I've a mind to kill you," hoarsely said the Road Raider chief.

"Don't do it, for you'll spoil yer robbin' trade, as I told yer."

"Then mount my horse and go, or I'll lose all patience."

"You go with him, Benton and Luke."

"Yes, sir," and the two men stepped to either side of the horse, the chief being the only man who was mounted in the attack on the coach, while the men kept their horses back in the timber a few hundred yards.

What Ribbon Rob meant to do neither Kate, or those in the coach had any idea; but they felt that he was plotting some way to help them.

He managed to give to Mr. Conrad a look that was full of meaning, and mounting the horse of Captain Brass he rode off with one of the outlaws walking on either side of the horse.

He soon disappeared around a bend in the trail, and the chief stepped up to the coach door and began to address Mr. Conrad.

But hardly had he uttered half a dozen words, when the clear notes of a bugle fell on the ears of all, and around the bend was heard the clatter of hoofs.

"Cavalry, by Heaven!" cried the chief.

Then around the curve in the trail dashed a horseman, and from the hoof-strokes others were following.

"The Dragoon! The Dragoon!"

The frightened Road Raiders yelled the name, and the chief shouted:

"Rally in the rocks, boys, and beat them back!"

But suddenly there came the crack of a whip, and with a bound the horses were off, Kate Conrad holding the reins.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A PLAN THAT WORKED WELL.

WHILE Ribbon Rob had been talking to the Road Raider chief he happened to glance backward, and suddenly saw a horseman ride into view.

The horseman seemed to instantly take in the situation, for he wheeled about quickly and disappeared.

But in the glance he had of him Ribbon Rob had recognized the Dragoon.

He looked over the crowd of Road Raiders, and noted that they had all been too much interested in what was going on about them to see the horseman's coming and retreat.

The fact was Captain Brass's spy had reported the coming of the strangers and that they would pan out a small fortune, so all the Raiders were eager for the booty.

Thus it was that Ribbon Rob had said the valuables had been buried by him back down the trail, and the seeing of the halt by the coach, by the picket of the Raiders, had carried out this idea.

"The Dragoon is there, and he means business, so I'll jist go back, and I guess they'll send two of ther varmint with me, and that will make two less ter fight," he said to himself.

So he urged for the chief's horse, and it was given him, while Ribbon Rob was not disarmed, as Captain Brass knew his nature too well to think he would desert his stage-coach, and his passengers.

"He'll get the booty," thought Captain Brass, and selecting two of his best men to go with him, he started the dandy driver off on his errand.

As he drew near the bend in the trail, Ribbon

Rob talked loud, for he wanted the Dragoon to hear him, if he was there.

Rounding the bend, as they came near some rocks piled up high on one side, Rob cast his eyes about him.

His quick eyes detected the trail of the Dragoon, and he thought:

"There is several horses turned here."

Then he searched the thicket and the rocks, and was expecting, or at least hoping, for what came:

"Hands up, quick!"

The startled Raiders followed Rob's example, and threw their hands up into the air, for they saw a repeating-rifle covering them, and the Dragoon was at the butt of it.

"Glory hally—hally—hallylujah to kingdom come!" cried Ribbon Rob, while the Dragoon stepped quickly out from among the rocks, his rifle still at a cover.

"Rob, tie that man's hands quickly behind him," said the Dragoon.

Rob seized the man on his left and, with the lariat, at once made him secure, while the Dragoon as quickly bound the other, but not until he had to deal him a blow in the face to show him that he was his master.

"I have two led horses here, Rob, so they shall mount and serve as apparent force for us."

Out came three horses at a call from the Dragoon, one hitched to the horn of the saddle on the center animal, which was the own steed of the Darling of Destiny.

The two led horses carried small packs, but the two Road Raiders were made to mount, and their legs were secured to the girths.

"Now, Rob, we are ready."

"You mean to charge ther Raiders, cap'n?"

"Yes, and you lead one horse, and I the other, and I'll change these fellows a little."

He stepped to one of the horses and took out of the pack a uniform coat and put it on one of the desperadoes.

A military cap was put on the other's head, while the man with the coat had his slouch hat doubled up, the rim under.

"Lordy! they is lovely soldiers; but hain't you afeard they'll sing out, cap'n?"

"If one does he dies," was the quiet rejoinder, and the men at once dismissed such determination to do so, had they entertained the idea.

All this had not taken five minutes, and being ready, the Darling of Destiny took from its case on the saddle housing, a small silver bugle.

With consummate skill he blew the rally, the notes ringing in hundreds of echoes through the mountains.

"Come!"

As the words broke from the lips of the Dragoon he started forward, the led horse following close behind, and Ribbon Rob also spurring up close with the animal he was leading.

Around the bend they swept, the bugle still ringing, and they charged full upon the Road Raiders about the coach.

The reader has seen the panic that seized them, and as Captain Brass, as he heard the bugle, looked as though he meant to do some desperate act, Kate Conrad, with consummate nerve, decided to act.

The brake was let up, the reins grasped, and the whip-lash flew forward with a crack, all in an instant of time.

Could Captain Brass have done so, he would have stopped the team; but it was impossible, and he saw the stage roll out of his grasp.

Then he turned to call upon his men to beat back the coming troopers, as he supposed them at the first glance, and to his dismay he beheld them flying for their horses.

Thus deserted he had but one thing to do, and he did it.

A powerful, athletic man, he knew that his life depended upon his heels, and he ran like a deer.

His own splendid horse was gone, so he had to mount one of the animals ridden by one of the two men who had gone as guard to Ribbon Rob.

As the "cavalry" did not dash on in pursuit, Captain Brass tried to rally his men; but the rattling bullets from the Dragoon's repeating-rifle came flying through the woods, and the Road Raiders kept on once more in their headlong flight.

"I was a fool to bring only eight men," he muttered, savagely.

"I should have brought my entire force."

"Now I have gained nothing, lost my best horse, and two of my men, for they evidently were right upon the troops, and were captured."

"That Darling of Destiny had his troop with him, and I must be careful, for he may have come on the hunt for me."

"I shall lie close in camp for a while, and then act, and the end of that gallant Dragoon shall come."

In no amiable mood Captain Brass returned to his retreat, and poured into the ears of Flush Fred his misfortunes.

He found in that person a sympathetic listener, for he had been quite subdued since his night tramp back to the retreat, after his unsuccessful attempt to run off the Dragoon's horses.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE RUNAWAY.

KATE CONRAD's first thought, as the horses dashed off and left the Road Raiders behind, was of congratulations upon their escape.

She glanced back and saw, as she supposed, cavalry coming to the rescue.

So she settled herself well in her seat, took the reins in hand and began to draw on the wheel-horses a little, preparatory to coming to a halt.

In his home East Mr. Conrad had indulged in the luxury of a coach-and-four, and Kate's place had always been with him upon the box.

Often she would drive by the hour, and as they were wont to take jaunts for weeks through the country, with a party of friends, Kate sometimes drove by day and night over the roughest roads.

She thus became noted as an expert and fearless driver, and there was nothing she would not handle the ribbons over.

A superb horsewoman also, she was not afraid of horses, and when she took the reins over Ribbon Rob's team it was with a perfect consciousness of her power to handle the animals.

But just here Miss Conrad reckoned wrong, for the team of Ribbon Rob were spirited, wiry horses, many of them had been runners on the Pony Express before they were put to staging, and they were full of life and go.

They preferred a run to a walk, especially with Gilt Edge City only a few miles away, where a supper and night's rest awaited them.

Many people had wondered that Ribbon Rob dared drive that team of six wild horses as he did, and over the mountain trails.

But they knew Rob, and his strength was something wonderful, while his foot could put down the heavy brake when needed.

Had Kate known that a short distance ahead was the most perilous part of the road, and a down run to Gilt Edge City, it is certain that she would not have started the team, for the danger from the Road Raiders was less than a runaway down the mountain.

When Kate decided to come to a halt she drew in her reins well, and at once found that she might as well draw against a huge boulder as those iron jaws.

Then she spoke to the horses, now getting into a run, but she might as well have saved her breath.

Next she tried the brake, but her little foot would not move it.

Then Kate Conrad turned pale; but she did not lose her nerve, and keeping the reins well in hand she determined to guide the horses in the trail as well as she could.

But there was dismay in her face when she realized that the team were running away.

Those in the coach realized it, too, and yet they could do nothing, for to spring out would be certain death.

On, on, the horses went, and Kate could only hold the reins and utter prayers.

Suddenly she heard a shout, and turning her head beheld a horseman coming on at a run.

Behind him were three others, but they were not riding as was the one that was now close to the stage.

He was mounted upon a superb black horse, wearing military trappings and bridle, and the rider was in uniform.

This much Kate saw, and then from her lips came the two words:

"Thank God!"

"Hold them steady, miss, and I'll soon aid you."

Such were the words she heard, and she saw, by another glance, that the horseman was gaining rapidly.

The stage team was now going at full speed, their heads thrown up, and they were dragging the coach along at a frightful pace.

The trail was narrow in places, barely room enough for the coach to pass between the rocks on either side; then it bordered a cliff, and again descended a steep hill.

But Kate Conrad still clung to the reins, watched the road ahead, and did all in her power to guide the team.

Her father called out to her from within not to lose her nerve, Sylvester Vernon shouted advice as to what to do, her mother was silently praying, and Pink was popping her head out of first one window and then the other, and terribly excited for the safety of her young mistress, and not thinking of her own danger.

Suddenly the stretched-out head of a black horse appeared at the window.

The red nostrils were wide open, and the breath came hard and fast as he pressed on.

Then came the neck, then a form in the saddle.

Raising his hat politely as he looked in the stage, the rider said:

"Have no fear, for I will soon check them."

Leaning over, the horseman grasped the top rail firmly with one hand and then threw one leg over the horse until he rode sideways.

One foot was placed upon the step over the fore-wheel, and a firm grip was gotten with the other hand.

"Back, Trailer."



The words were addressed to the horse, which intelligently dropped back, and his master was clinging to the stage.

"Now, miss, I'll relieve you of your hard task."

Kate had moved to the left, as she saw the daring man mount the stage from his horse at the risk of his life, and gave him the reins as he took his seat.

She handed them to him quickly, and without a word, and he saw that they were all right, not twisted, and each one drawing well.

"Thank you," he said, and he drew upon the reins a long, hard pull, while he called to the horses in a tone of command.

The frightened animals felt the strong pressure, heard the cool, commanding voice, and felt that they had a master to deal with.

Then the foot was placed upon the brake, and, small and shapely though it was, the pressure was sufficient; the scraping against the wheels showed that the brake was working well, and in a minute more the team were brought to a standstill.

And just in time, for a short hundred feet ahead the trail wound around a steep mountain spur, along a narrow ledge, which could not be passed over faster than a walk, as a precipice was upon the other side that looked down nearly a hundred feet.

"Oh, sir, we all owe you our lives," cried Kate, laying her hands upon the arm of the daring man who had come to their rescue.

"I am happy in having done so, I assure you, miss," was the gallant reply, while just then up dashed Ribbon Rob with his two prisoners, and he shouted in a voice that rung like a trumpet:

"Ladies and gents, let me interdoce to yer ther Darlin' o' Destiny, and ther whitest man in these here parts."

And thus Kate Conrad knew who her rescuer was.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE ARRIVAL.

KATE CONRAD was gazing into the handsome face of the Dragoon, and at the blunt introduction of him by Ribbon Rob she saw him blush like a girl.

Her father and Mr. Vernon, as though anxious to get out, had sprung from the coach when it stopped, but Mrs. Conrad and Pink remained, the former remarking that she no longer felt any dread.

"Permit me to thank you, for more than my life," and Mr. Conrad's voice trembled as he spoke to the Dragoon, who raised his hat and replied:

"It has all turned out well, sir, and I congratulate myself upon having been so fortunate as to serve you."

"Come, Rob, shall I drive on, or will you?"

"Cap'n, I'll stay right here, for I cave to you in holdin' ther ribbons."

"You is the boss, and none but you c'u'd 'a' did what you done jist now and stopped thet team."

"I owes yer thanks, Pard Dragoon, and I is yours fer life, so sail right on with 'em inter Gilt Edge and let ther boys see yer is a ribbon-holder yerself."

"I'll fetch yer horse and this gallows fruit," and Ribbon Rob glanced significantly at his prisoners when he referred to "gallows fruit."

"Then, gentlemen, if you do not fear to re-enter the stage I will drive on," said the Dragoon with a smile, and he added:

"And will you still retain your seat on the box, miss, or do you prefer to get into the stage?"

"If you are willing, sir, I prefer to remain where I am."

The Dragoon bowed and then started the team, while he answered:

"You are wise, if you are fond of finescenery, for the drive from here in is a grand one."

"I do enjoy beautiful scenery, as you may know when I tell you I paint a little; but do you know, sir, even after all of good Ribbon Rob's flourishing introduction I do not know your name, and I will set a good example by telling you that mine is Kate Conrad."

"And mine is Earl Gaston, Miss Conrad," was the reply.

"You are a soldier, of course?"

"I am at present a miner in Gilt Edge City."

She thought she detected a desire to avoid questioning, so she said:

"Had you not caught up with the stage before we reached here, we would have been dashed to pieces," and she shuddered as she glanced down over the precipice.

"Yes, this is a dangerous turn to make at a pace faster than a walk, and I had it in mind during my chase of you."

"But what became of your troopers?"

The Dragoon laughed, and then he told how he was returning from having carried some dispatches to a scouting command, and found at the station that the stage had left with Mr. Conrad and his party.

"I had purchased a couple of fine black horses, and a few articles back in the town, so made my new animals carry the packs."

"Coming upon the scene where you were in the clutches of the Road Raiders, I drew back quickly and contemplated sounding my bugle and charging, when I saw Ribbon Rob approaching with two of the outlaws."

"When he came we at once arranged our little plan, and it worked well; but let me congratulate you, Miss Conrad, upon your superb driving."

He had not told her about the slain dispatch-bearer, nor of how he had captured the two men with Ribbon Rob.

He was modest as a girl, and hardly spoke of himself.

Knowing how to drive herself, Kate noted how superbly he held his horses in hand, and once away from the most dangerous part of the trail, he sent them along at a lively pace.

She was in ecstasies over the beauty of the scene, and gazed eagerly upon Gilt Edge City as it came into view.

"And that is our future home?" she said.

"Do you see that group of cabins on the hill, far over to the left?"

"Yes."

"That is Fort Folly, which Landlord Champ has fitted up for you, and it is the best place by far in the camps."

"And that large building yonder?"

"Is The Barracks, once a fort, now the hotel of Landlord Champ."

"It seems well situated for a fort, on a ridge as it is, and commanding the approaches upon all sides, while I should think that Fort Folly would be commanded from the mountain above it."

"You speak like a soldier, Miss Conrad, and if the officer who built Fort Folly had had your strategic observation, he would have escaped a very severe reprimand from his general."

"Some persons see, but yet observe nothing; but what a quaint place Gilt Edge City is."

"It is more than quaint," was the dry reply.

"And where is your house?"

"Do you see that cabin front away off on the hill, just looking out of a glen or canyon?"

"Yes."

"That is where I live."

"All alone?"

She regretted the question as soon as asked; but he answered:

"I have a faithful comrade with me in my colored servant."

"Well, I am determined to like Gilt Edge City, and if the rest of its citizens pan out—is not that the word?—as the two whom I have met, I am sure we will all be delighted."

"Your father is to mine here, I believe?"

"Yes, for he has great confidence in his ability to find gold, and did find a fortune once; but then he was too generous with his signature on the back of notes, and lost heavily, so determined to come here and get a fortune the equal of his other."

"Ask him to be cautious what he buys, and to consult Landlord Champ, for he will not deceive him."

"Thank you; but there is quite a crowd at The Barracks, as you call the hotel."

"They are expecting you, doubtless, and, as I am representing Ribbon Rob, I must announce our coming in proper style."

He took the bugle, which hung to his belt by a cord, and instantly the notes rung out with thrilling cadence.

Ribbon Rob was a good hand with a stage horn, but never before had the crowd gathered at The Barracks heard such bugle music, and they cheered lustily as the stage dashed up, and they saw who was upon the box.

Landlord Champ ran out and greeted the visitors and threw open the stage door, while the Dragoon, having thrown his reins to the stable-boys, lifted Kate Conrad lightly to the ground.

Raising his hat, as she turned to Sylvester Vernon, he was about to go, when she said:

"Captain Gaston, permit me to present my father's secretary, Mr. Vernon, who is also one who owes you a debt of gratitude for saving his life."

"I do, indeed, sir, and I am happy to have the honor of meeting you, Captain Gaston," replied Sylvester Vernon, who, though angry at the manner in which Kate had persisted in remaining on the box, could not but feel that he owed to the Dragoon his life.

In answer to the numerous inquiries regarding Ribbon Rob, the Dragoon pointed down the road to where he was seen coming with his prisoners, and was then led into the hotel by Mr. Conrad to meet his wife.

It was decided that the family should remain at The Barracks for the night, as it would be dark before they could get into their new home, and Landlord Champ had his pleasantest rooms fitted up for them and as remote as possible from the bar.

While talking to Mrs. Conrad the Dragoon suddenly heard wild cries without of:

"Hang 'em!"

"String 'em up!"

"No, no trial, but hemp!"

"Pardon me, please," he said, quietly, and hastily left the little parlor, for he saw that the strangers were greatly alarmed.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### AN OUTBREAK.

THE cries that had caused the Dragoon to leave the parlor and hasten to the front of the hotel arose from the crowd of miners congregated there and fully a hundred in number.

It was known that the strangers, who were to live in Fort Folly, were to arrive with Ribbon Rob that afternoon.

Rumor had it, too, that the Road Raiders would never let the strangers come through without big money as ransom.

So a great deal of curiosity was felt to see them and to know if Ribbon Rob got through without a halt from the Road Raiders.

Curiosity, therefore, had caused quite a large number to congregate at The Barracks, most of them being idlers, or workers in the camps and not out at the mines.

The crowd was an ugly one, and they had been in to visit Brindle a little too often while waiting for the stage, which was late.

Seeing the Dragoon driving, instead of Ribbon Rob, had caused great excitement, and when at last the driver came up with his prisoners the crowd was at fever heat for anything.

"Hello, Rob! who've yer got thar!" shouted one.

Ribbon Rob was riding the Road Raider chief's horse, and with their hands tied behind them, and mounted upon the pack-animals belonging to the Darling of Destiny, were his prisoners.

They were wild-looking specimens of humanity, now that the masks had been torn from their faces, and they seemed to realize fully their danger.

Trotting obediently behind was Trailer, the splendid steed of the Dragoon.

Halting at the door of The Barracks Ribbon Rob called out:

"Landlord, rooms for two select boarders, please, until they is tried and hanged, for these men be Road Raiders."

Wicked men are ever ready to condemn others, and instantly a howl of rage arose against the prisoners.

"Hold on, pards, fer you is jist a little too rapid."

"These men is prisoners o' ther Darlin' o' Destiny," cried Ribbon Rob.

"They are Road Raiders and shall hang," said one.

"They may hang, but you hain't a-goin' ter hev a trial over them."

"They are guilty and shall swing now."

"Yes, up with them."

"Hold on, pards; don't go too fast, for Ribbon Rob is right," cried Landlord Champ.

"They is going ter hang now," a voice said.

Then arose the cries that alarmed the strangers in the parlor and caused the Dragoon to leave the room.

Instantly Mr. Conrad and the others ran to the windows, for, forgetting about the prisoners, and knowing the lawlessness of the country, they feared that even they might be the cause of the miners' hatred.

When they reached the windows they saw the Dragoon saunter out upon the piazza in the easiest manner possible.

Not a sign of excitement was upon his handsome face, and he was even smiling.

The horses from which Ribbon Rob and the prisoners had dismounted stood near the steps, and the crowd surged about them.

Ribbon Rob and the two Road Raiders had not been able to reach the steps, for the crowd had surrounded them and checked their advance up to the piazza.

Standing on the top step was Landlord Champ, and he was trying to quell the excitement of the angry crowd.

Ribbon Rob was calm and determined.

He had a tight grasp upon his prisoners, and he meant to cling to them as long as he could.

He showed no temper, only earnestness, and he called out:

"Pards, these men were put in my charge."

"Send for the Dragoon, and if he says hang 'em, then I don't keer, for I knows they deserves it; but ther man as attempts ter put a rope around 'em, until ther Darlin' o' Destiny says so, has got ter be grave fruit ther moment he does."

The strangers in the window saw and heard all now, and it was a relief to feel that they were not the object of the crowd's hatred.

They admired the pluck of Ribbon Rob, and could see that, from his position, he had not observed the Dragoon's presence.

In fact, as he stood near the upper door, no one of the excited mob seemed to have noticed him.

"Yes, men, Rob is right and you are wrong."

"Leave the prisoners until the Dragoon says what is to be done with them," called out Landlord Champ.

The crowd yelled, and all that was necessary was a leader to make them seize the prisoners.

That leader at once appeared.

He was a tall, lank-bodied man, with a beardless face, red hair, and eyes that glared like a tiger's.

He was known to be a desperate fellow, loving a fight more than anything else, and he had a



way of springing upon his foes which had gotten him the name of Panther prefixed to that of Pete, which he answered to.

Springing upon the steps, he called out:

"Pards, ther Darlin' o' Destiny don't run this town of I has my say, and I says so now."

"These men is Road Raiders, and I says hang 'em, and I puts ther rope about now."

He seized one of the prisoners as he spoke, and threw a rope, which he had ready, over his neck.

A wild shout greeted his bold act, but suddenly above the shouts one voice was heard.

"Hold on, there, Panther Pete, you are going too fast!"

It was the Darling of Destiny who spoke, and he advanced to the head of the piazza steps and confronted Panther Pete and the maddened crowd.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### SETTLING A DIFFICULTY.

AT the words of the Darling of Destiny, addressed to Panther Pete, the eyes of the whole wild crowd were turned upon him.

He had spoken in a voice that rung, to make the crowd hear him; but they saw now that he was as serene as a May morning.

Panther Pete had made his boast, and all now desired to see the upshot of it.

The "Panther" was feared and well known.

He was a brute in his way and well deserved the name he had won.

The Dragoon had also been seen tried, and he was of a different caliber from the Panther.

The crowd knew well that they had no right to hang those two prisoners without the sanction of their captor.

But they thirsted for excitement and here was a chance for it.

When they saw that it must come to a question between the Dragoon and Panther Pete, the excitement became greater, and the prisoners were forgotten.

Would Panther Pete back down from his words?

What would he do?

What would the Dragoon do?

Such were the thoughts of the crowd.

As for Panther Pete he turned quickly at the words of the Darling of Destiny, his hand upon his revolver.

But his first look was into the calm, fearless eyes of the Dragoon.

"Pard, does you say these men sha'n't hang?" he called out rudely.

"I have said nothing about that as yet."

"Well, what does yer say now?"

"I say that those men are Road Raiders, my prisoners, and that they are to be tried by a jury of twelve miners, and, if found guilty shall suffer according to the decision of those who try them."

"We don't do things that way in these parts, Dragoon, and you might as well know it now," was the impudent response.

"This talk is idle, Panther Pete, for I have told you what shall be done, so go your way and let these men alone."

"I don't, though, for we hang these men now."

"Don't we, pards?"

Many of the crowd had already gone over to the Dragoon, but there were plenty yet to keep up the excitement and to incite bloodshed, and a chorus of many voices cried:

"Hang 'em now!"

"That settles it, and you keep yer hands off, Dragoon, ef yer knows what's good fer yer."

As he spoke, Panther Pete sprung up the steps toward the piazza.

All knew his strength, and yet just what he meant to do, no one knew.

He doubtless intended to direct the movements of the crowd, and hang the men up from the heavy bar that upheld the hotel lamp over the steps, for he had his rope in his hand.

But suddenly he was seized in a grip of iron, dragged bodily from his feet and hurled ten feet away upon the heads of the crowd, going in his flight over the two prisoners and Ribbon Rob, who stood by the bottom step.

The crowd tried to separate, but he caught them, and thus broke his fall.

A perfect howl of admiration went up at this wonderful feat of strength on the part of the Dragoon, and Sylvester Vernon in the window called out:

"Marvelous! marvelous!"

Not hurt by his fall, but livid with rage, Panther Pete arose, and drawing a revolver, fairly leaped toward his enemy.

All gave way to him, and he had reached the bottom step when he opened fire.

But it was his last shot, for he fell dead upon the steps, a bullet in the center of his forehead.

"Gentlemen, are you satisfied to allow me to do as I deem best with my prisoners?" came in the calm voice of the Dragoon.

The cheers of the crowd answered him, and calling to Ribbon Rob, the Dragoon said:

"Let us take them to a room the landlord has for them, and he will get a guard for them."

"You're still boss, cap'n; but go in and calm ther strangers, as they may think our play here a leetle rough, this bein' their fu'st day."

The Dragoon called to a man and told him to have the body taken off for burial, and turning, he entered the parlor once more, where their deep interest in what had occurred still held the strangers.

"I fear your *entrée* into Gilt Edge City will cause you to desire to at once depart, Mrs. Conrad," said the Dragoon in his pleasant way.

There was not the shadow of any excitement, his face was serene and smiling, and no one could have believed him to be an actor in the tragedy that had just occurred.

"I expected wild scenes, sir, when I consented to come; but the one just occurring, and our having been halted on the road by highwaymen—"

"Road Raiders, mamma; you must get the right terms used here," corrected Kate in her off-hand way.

"Well, Road Raiders, since my daughter wishes it; I confess, I say, it is more than I anticipated, but I congratulate you, Captain Gaston, upon your safety."

"My dear madam, I hope that you do not think I fired without just cause."

"I shrink from taking human life, and yet these men are many of them as dangerous as wild-cats."

"That one, Panther Pete they called him, has killed half a dozen men right here, and was considered a terror, in the language of the border."

"He had no right to drag those men off and hang them, and I, as their captor could not permit it."

"He played a bold game and he lost."

"And I never saw anything so coolly done, captain."

"You are a marvel, sir," said Mr. Conrad.

"I have had considerable schooling in wild life, sir, but let me ask if you have horses with your wagon-train, which let me tell you arrived at Fort Folly half an hour ago."

"Indeed, I am glad to hear this, for we can move in all right in the morning, and my wife needs quiet; but as to horses I would say that I expected to purchase saddle animals here."

"You can do so, sir, for Mr. Champ can supply you, but if you will permit me to present to Miss Conrad the very fine animal that Captain Brass so cleverly lost through Ribbon Rob, I will feel gratified, and she certainly deserves him for her driving off so cleverly."

"But, sir, you may need him yourself, and—"

"No, I ride only black horses, and I now have five superb animals, so I beg Miss Conrad's acceptance of the Raider."

"What do you say, Kate?"

"I will accept him in the same spirit that he is offered, and I sincerely thank you, Captain Gaston," and Kate offered her hand.

"I will send him over in the morning."

"And I shall name him Dragoon," said Kate with a laugh, as the Dragoon bowed himself out.

"Come, Rob, go to supper with me," said the Dragoon, as he walked out upon the piazza, and mounting his own horse, while Ribbon Rob sprung upon the Raider chief's handsome bay, the two rode off, leading the pack-animals.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### AT HOME.

WHEN they went to their rooms, the strangers were really surprised to find out how comfortable Landlord Champ had made them, and they began to think that after all they might not have to "rough it" as much as they had feared.

Kate Conrad stood at the window of her room, and her eyes were upon the Darling of Destiny and Ribbon Rob as they wended their way down the one street that Gilt Edge City boasted of.

She saw them cross the stream and ascend the hill toward the Dragoon's cabin, and then darkness hid them from sight.

"Who would have thought of meeting such a man here?" she muttered.

"And who is he?"

"He seems to me to have some sorrow to bear."

"Well, he is a remarkable man, as handsome as an Apollo, as brave as a lion, and yet he has the gentleness of a woman."

"His hand is small, and his grasp is firm yet honest; but how he did hurl that desperado through the air, and seemed no more ruffled than if he had done nothing."

"Papa and mamma both urged him to call, and he said he would do so; but I can see that Sylvester is as jealous of him as he can be."

Then Kate was called by Pink to supper, the latter remarking:

"Miss Kate, I'm afraid I came all the way out here to fall in love, for I do think that stage-driver is just splendid."

"And I like the Dragoon, Pink, so we will not be rivals; but, indeed, Ribbon Rob is a fine fellow, handsome and brave."

"And don't Mr. Varnon look black when you treat the Dragoon so nicely?"

"Does he?" and Kate laughed, as she went to join the others at the supper-table.

Landlord Champ had done his best, and the supper set before his guests was a tempting one.

He had a good cook, and there were venison steaks, boiled birds, hot biscuit, baked potatoes, honey and delicious coffee.

All enjoyed the meal immensely, and while the ladies returned to their room after supper, Mr. Conrad and Sylvester Vernon rode out with Landlord Champ to Fort Folly.

It was a ride of a mile, and the moon was shining brightly, so that Mr. Conrad and Vernon could see well as they rode away.

The wagon-train, which Mr. Conrad had chartered to bring his effects from the last railroad station, had arrived before sunset.

There were half a dozen "prairie schooners," as the border wagons were called, a cart and a carved spring wagon, the two latter being purchases of Mr. Conrad.

Half a dozen fine cows, seven sheep, and one load of pigs and poultry, with two cats and three dogs would give the place a most farm-like and home look.

Then there was a negro woman as cook, her husband as major-domo, and their son and daughter, respectively eighteen and twenty.

The teamsters were anxious to start back in the morning, so the household goods were unloaded that night, and when Mr. Conrad returned he was able to tell his wife that things were getting into pretty comfortable shape, while he had found their home was far beyond his expectations.

Never in its history had The Barracks been more quiet than it was that night, and Mr. Conrad quite won the hearts of the frequenters when he entered the saloon with Vernon and invited all to join him in a drink.

Vernon called for a repetition of the drinks, and the crowd voted them good fellows when they retired.

Tired out with their long journey, none of the party arose very early the following morning, although they were anxious to move into their new home, so that it was nearly ten o'clock before they started for Fort Folly, Ribbon Rob driving them over in Landlord Champ's spring wagon.

Ribbon Rob had remained all night with the Dragoon, and having a day off before starting back on his run, was anxious to see his friends settled in their new home, so had come to The Barracks to take them over.

As they drove along they came suddenly upon a little procession, moving along by a trail that crossed the one they were on.

There were over a hundred men in line, all walking slowly, while one at the head was playing the Dead March on an accordeon.

Six men were bearing a coffin on a stretcher, and in spite of the solemnity of death, the scene brought a smile to the strangers, as Ribbon Rob came out in his original way:

"I halts fer a stiff allus, as it are bad luck ter cross ahead or through a pурсession that is carryin' fruit ter ther grave."

"Now, thet galoot in the box, and which thet accordeon is howlin' so mournful over, are ther pilgrim thet ther Darlin' o' Destiny kilt."

"Them with him hain't his friends, fer he hed none; but they is them as was most afeerd of him when he were livin', and is goin' ter see him well planted now."

"Then, yer see ther Dragoon stands all expenses, with enough over ter treat ther boys when they gits back ag'in to Ther Barracks."

Such was Ribbon Rob's story of the burying of Panther Pete.

"You have many funerals here, do you not, sir?" asked Mrs. Conrad.

"Waal, the'r hain't many nateral deaths, marm, but ther boys is called on ter tarn up the'r toes quite some often, fer lead and steel fevers is catchin' in these parts."

"And you have a cemetery near town?"

"It is up yonder, marm, not very far from your home; but then yer'll find them neighbors peaceable and quiet, a leetle dif'rent from what they was when prowlin' round full o' tangle-foot."

"We calls ther place Rock o' Ages, marm, fer it's a place they clings to."

Ribbon Rob certainly entertained his hearers, but had he seen the smiles on their faces he would not have understood, in his border innocence, that he was saying aught that was amusing.

Arriving at Fort Folly one and all expressed themselves as delighted.

The negro servants had gotten to work early, and all in the large cabin was ready for its occupants, the cattle were feeding on the hillside, the chickens, ducks and geese were wandering about the stockade, delighted at their freedom from the coops, and the dogs barked a joyous welcome.

Awaiting their coming was a tall, fine-looking negro, who bowed with courtly grace and said to Kate:

"Miss Conrad, my master asked me to bring your horse over to you with his compliments."

He held the beautiful animal by the bridle, and he looked as sleek as Hannibal could make him.

Kate was delighted, and caressing the horse an instant he followed her about as a dog would.

"Please say to Captain Gaston that I thank



him heartily, and hope to have him for an escort on my first ride on my beautiful horse."

Thus entered Mr. Conrad and his family into their new home, and their coming was a nine-days wonder to Gilt Edge City.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### A KNOCK-DOWN ARGUMENT.

THE room in which the two Road Raiders had been placed was a stout one, and Landlord Champ said that he did not doubt but that it had been the former guard-house of The Barracks.

It was ten feet square and double-walled, the walls being of heavy logs.

The same was the case with the floor and the ceiling.

It was in one corner of The Barracks, and had two small windows, made by sawing a log in two, but not wide enough to allow of a human form passing through.

Landlord Champ was not unkind, and feeling that it was a foregone conclusion that the prisoners were to die, he made them as comfortable as possible for their remaining hours.

He got two men to watch them, to stand four hours on and off between them, and they had the key of the heavy door, and no one could see the prisoners without the permission of the one who was on the watch.

It was the evening after their capture, and expecting that the men would be tried that night, there was a large number of people at The Barracks.

The main topics of conversation were equally divided between the arrival of the strangers, the killing of Panther Pete by the Dragoon, and the expected trial of the prisoners.

All felt sure that they would hang the Road Raiders, no matter who tried them, and no one cared to miss that very interesting ceremony to them.

Why the Dragoon did not have them at once hanged was what many could not understand.

Among those most interested in the prisoners, were two new-comers to Gilt Edge City.

These were two men, who had not arrived on foot, but on horseback, and had come with money enough to buy a mine if they could not find one.

They were stout-looking fellows, men who appeared to be able to take their own part, and they had already bought a cabin and a mine that paid fairly well.

So they considered themselves citizens of Gilt Edge City already, and thought they had a right to air their ideas.

They had given out that their names were Rattler and Stonefist, and one Gilt-Edge citizen who was great "on his muscle," seemed to feel that Stonefist implied a fighter, and so he determined to sample the new-comer's dexterity and strength.

To do this he picked a quarrel with Stonefist, and insisted that it should be fought without weapons.

That man regretted having made the mistake of not getting some one else to find out what Stonefist could do, for the first blow of the new-comer sent the Gilt-Edge representative flying into a corner, and it took nearly a pint of liquor to make him come round enough to know that a mule had not kicked him.

Stonefist became a hero at once, and as his comrade was fully his equal, and his name was suggestive of shooting and other border amusements, he was let severely alone.

"Does yer think the trial will come off ter-night?" asked Rattler of a newly-formed acquaintance.

"Now, pard, ther Darlin' o' Destiny hain't come over yit, but if he does, I guesses it will."

"And who are this Darlin' o' Destiny, pard?"

"Waal, yer is strange in Gilt Edge City not ter know thet gent," and then the speaker gave his version of who the Darling of Destiny was.

"Then yer looks on him as a kind o' king bee, pard?"

"Yes, fer he are one."

"Thet are a bad thing fer a community ter allow, fer when a man gits the reins in his teeth he's apt ter run away and hurt somebody; but who are thet gent comin' in thar?"

"Thet are thet Dragoon."

"Waal, he's likely-lookin' but he don't seem ther man ter toss folks round," said Rattler.

"Not much," Stonefist remarked.

"Ef you hit him onc't, Stonefist, thar'd be no more o' him."

"Waal, I'll hit him ef he gives me ther chance; but I guesses he won't fight without his gun."

"I'll ask him, pard, ef yer really is sp'ilin fer a knock-down," said the Gilt-Edge citizen.

"I am willin'," was the reply, and as the Dragoon passed near Landlord Champ he was hailed with:

"Cap'n, I has been talkin' to two strangers about yer, and one of 'em is named Stonefist, and he kin knock anything down I kin tell yer, but I says to him he'd better go slow with you."

"My dear fellow, I am not a common bruiser; I avoid and do not seek quarrels," said the Dragoon, pleasantly.

"Does yer call me a common bruiser?" cried Stonefist, springing to his feet.

The Darling of Destiny looked him over very carefully, and replied quickly:

"I meant not to offend any one, but, as you seem to be seeking trouble, I will say that if you are not the commonest kind of bully and scamp you belie your looks."

Landlord Champ had turned at the first words, and he now saw that the two men had come there to invite trouble; but he felt that the Dragoon was able to take care of himself, so he stood quietly.

A hush fell upon all at the words of the Dragoon, and every eye was turned upon Stonefist.

They expected to see him draw his revolver, or attempt to do so; but instead he said:

"I jest remarked that I guess you was afeerd ter tackle a man without yer gun, and yer is here among yer friends, whar, if I draws, and my pard does, we is kilt, for we stands no chance."

"I ask no one to fight my battles, my man, and I seek no trouble with you; but if you drive me to it I shall have to teach you a lesson."

"Does yer mean with yer fists?"

"Yes, for you are hardly worth the powder and lead to kill you."

"Here, Pard Rattler, hold these weepens," and giving his belt of arms to his comrade, Stonefist sprang out into the open space, ready for the fray.

"I pass this way, sir, stand aside," said the Dragoon, in a voice that had no tremor in it.

"You are armed, and I hain't."

"I shall not use my weapons on you, sir; but if you do not step aside I shall throw you out of my way."

All present nearly had seen what Stonefist could do in the way of a blow, and they did not feel that, strong as he had shown himself, the Dragoon could withstand one of his terrific blows.

So they waited with bated breath the result.

"Will you stand aside, sir?"

"I will not, and you take thet!"

As he spoke Stonefist let drive his powerful right arm, his huge fist doubled up, and his aim was at the face of the Dragoon.

From a hundred lips came a half-cry of alarm, for all expected to see the soldier go down.

But instead, somehow his left arm was on guard, the blow glanced off on it, and then, with a sickening thud the right fist of the Dragoon went full into the face of the bully.

It was a telling, crushing blow, and Stonefist fell like a log and lay where he fell, while the Darling of Destiny, seeming to realize how hard he could hit, passed on his way with Landlord Champ.

At the door the landlord turned and said:

"Gentlemen, it is decided that we try those two Road Raiders to-night, so the prisoners shall be brought in, and we'll have you draw lots for jurors, while the Dragoon has asked me to serve as judge."

A cheer greeted these words, and instantly all was attention for the coming trial.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### GILT-EDGE JUSTICE.

TAKING his seat at one of the tables in the saloon, Landlord Champ prepared to act as judge of the court.

Mr. Conrad had been asked to come and give his testimony, which he was most willing to do, and he had arrived in time to hear and see what had occurred between Stonefist and the Dragoon, and he was more amazed than ever at what it was in the power of the Darling of Destiny to do.

As for Stonefist, Rattler threw water in his face and then gave him some liquor, which revived him.

He felt of his nose in a melancholy way, and discovered that that useful member had been sorely dealt with.

Then his lips were cut and swollen, his eyes had been blackened, and altogether he felt as though a pile-driver had struck him.

"Didn't somebody hit me with a stone jug, pard?" he whispered to Rattler.

"No."

"Then I was hit over the head with a cheer."

"Nary."

"What was it, then?"

"Thet Dragoon's fist."

"No."

"Fact."

"I threw up my hands and let drive at him, but missed, and then—"

"You missed because his iron arm warded off yer blow, and then his fist struck yer fair in ther face, and oh, my! I thought you c'd hit, Stonefist, but yer hain't got no business with thet man."

"I believe yer. Lead or steel is ther only thing as will fix him," whispered Stonefist, lovingly nursing his nose and lips the while.

"I'll be a sight ter see ter-morrer," he said, disconsolately, and Rattler agreed with him.

The two witnesses, Mr. Conrad and the Dragoon, then took their places to the right of Landlord Champ, and the prisoners were brought in.

Stonefist and Rattler had heard that two of the Road Raiders had been caught, but which two they could not tell.

Now they saw their comrades brought in, and at a glance they recognized the two men, who were considered the best in the band.

But they dared not utter a word in their behalf, and they shrunk back that the prisoners might not see them, as Rattler remarked, in a low whisper:

"Ef they has ter hang, like as not they'd give us away, too."

A hat was then passed around with a number of white faro-chips and twelve red chips in it, and the crowd had to draw for them.

The twelve men who got the red chips were then called up near the table and given seats, and Landlord Champ opened court.

His words were few and to the point.

He told how the honest gold, dug by the miners, was taken from them by the band of Road Raiders while it was being sent home to their kindred, and that many a poor man had been utterly ruined thereby.

Then, when travelers were coming to Gilt Edge City, they were set upon and robbed by the Road Raiders, who were merciless and murderous.

The story of the last run over of the stage was then told, and Mr. Conrad was called upon to tell the story of the halting of the coach and all that had occurred.

He told his story in a frank manner that all heard and which added to his growing popularity, for he seemed anxious to appear as one of the citizens of Gilt Edge City.

Then the Dragoon was asked for his story, and in his easy-mannered way he told it, speaking of himself only when he had to do so, and then most modestly.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the charges against these men."

"They belong to the Road Raiders' band, and I ask you for your verdict."

"You can retire to the dining-room and discuss the matter, if so you wish," said Landlord Champ.

"No need o' movin' from whar we is, jedge, fer we is all agreed, thet is sart'in," assured one.

"Is this the opinion of you all?"

The twelve men nodded.

"And your verdict?"

"Guilty every time," said the spokesman.

"Well, prisoners, what have you to say for yourselves?"

"I says thet Cap'n Brass will make it hot fer this camp ef yer harms us," said one.

"Ther Road Raiders will avenge us," the other remarked.

"The jury find you guilty, and I now pass sentence upon you, and it is that within one hour's time you be taken to the Execution Tree near The Barracks, and hanged."

The men turned livid, and they were evidently deeply affected; but they knew there was no hope for them, and tried to face the ordeal boldly.

"Lordy, Pard Rattler, they is goin' ter hang 'em sart'in," whispered Stonefist.

"They is fer sure; but see, thet cussed Dragoon are risin' ter talk."

As Stonefist spoke, the Darling of Destiny arose and said:

"Your Honor, as I was the captor of these men, I ask to appoint their executioners."

"It is granted, certainly," said Champ.

"Then I appoint those two strangers there, that they may understand what Gilt-Edge justice is," and the Dragoon pointed directly at Rattler and Stonefist.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### IN A TRAP.

It was a startling announcement of the Darling of Destiny to make the two new men in town, pretended miners, the executioners of the two Road Raiders.

From where the prisoners sat they could not see to whom it was that the Dragoon referred, but the eyes of the crowd were turned upon the two strange men.

Stonefist had already made himself conspicuous by knocking down the champion miner of the camps, and then getting knocked down himself by the Dragoon.

His comrade was considered equally as good, the crowd thought, when he got a chance to show what he could do.

When the Dragoon made the suggestion that he did there were many who felt that he had some good reason for it.

Both Stonefist and Rattler were strangers.

They had ridden into town by night, and the next morning had bought a mine in a business-like way.

They had money, and paid liberally for all they got.

Introducing themselves by the names of Rattler and Stonefist, they had at once set themselves down to have a say in the affairs of Gilt Edge City without being invited to do so or waiting long enough to get acquainted.

As they had begun so well, the Dragoon seemed to be anxious to push them ahead so proposed what he did as to their being the hangmen for the Road Raiders.

The landlord transferred the arrangement of matters at once to the hands of the Dragoon,



who ordered the prisoners to be taken back to their lock-up for half an hour.

Once they were out of the room the Dragoon slipped out upon the piazza and confronted Stonefist and Rattler, who were quietly decamping, after having made a bluster about their being glad to hang the Road Raiders.

"This way, gentlemen, for I was just looking for you."

The two men muttered an oath, while Rattler said aloud:

"Yas, pard, we were going round by ther hallway ter see yer, fer it was so crowded makin' our way through ther saloon."

"Yes, it was easier to slip out upon the piazza; but come, I wish you to meet the judge, and he will give you directions what to do."

"Yas, cap'n."

Mentally cursing their luck, and wishing that they had been content to take a back seat and not push themselves forward, the two scamps went into the saloon where Landlord Champ and Mr. Conrad sat.

"Judge, kindly tell these men the duty they are to perform, for when strangers come into Gilt Edge City, they must be willing to show that they are anxious to become good citizens, and hence these gentlemen shall have the honor of hanging the Road Raiders."

"Certainly, captain, and I am glad you thought of it," said the landlord, and then he said to the two men:

"You are to wait here until the prisoners are brought forth, and then each of you are to take one as your man to execute."

"You will pinion their arms, place a noose about their necks, walk with them to our gallows-tree, in front of The Barracks, and there is a limb there over which the ropes are to be thrown and made fast."

"Ther same limb hev bore ther same kind o' fruit afore," said a bystander.

"A cart will be beneath the limb, and the men are to stand up in it."

"When ready you are to drag the cart out from under them and your work is done."

"Do you understand?"

"Yas," growled Stonefist.

Rattler nodded.

"One moment, judge," the Dragoon said.

"Well, captain?"

"I have a desire to have these executioners and the prisoners meet face to face unexpectedly, and you and Mr. Conrad, with several others I desire to take note of what occurs," and the Dragoon whispered the words.

Mr. Conrad was then called aside and notified, and half-a-dozen of the miners also.

The half-hour was then up, and the prisoners were sent in.

Ignorant of the little plot of the Dragoon against them, the two spies stood apart, and Rattler said:

"I hopes ther boys won't give us away, pard."

"It are ticklish, fer neither one of 'em likes you and me, Rattler, and they was mad because ther cap'n sent us instead o' them."

"We must give 'em ther wink and sign not ter betray us, fer ef they does that tree are likely ter grow more fruit."

"Yas, I don't half like ther tarn things hes tuk."

"I wishes they hed come instid o' us."

"Waal, we is all here tergether now, and I hopes fer ther best."

"Lordy! ef they sh'u'd squeal?"

"Ther jig is up fer us."

The men broke out in a cold sweat at the thought.

They had looked for a good time in Gilt Edge City, and they had suddenly gotten into a trap.

In their terror they cursed the Darling of Destiny roundly, but in their mind, for there were eyes upon them.

#### CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR IS HARD."

The guard had gone for the prisoners and they were heard returning along the hall.

They had been allowed half an hour alone in the guard-room for prayer, if they wished to so devote their time.

They knew the border too well to expect mercy and they were sure they would have to die.

In that half-hour of bitterness there came to them the thoughts of their past, their first crime, and then they glanced along the downward course they had taken.

Instead of joining in the larger army of honest miners and toiling hard for a fortune, they had preferred to turn Road Raiders and to kill for gold.

"We has got ter go," said one.

"Sure," was the reply of the other.

There were four guards with them, one on either side, and thus they were marched along the hallway and entered the saloon.

The Dragoon had arranged it so that they should come face to face with Stonefist and Rattler, and, under a pretense to escort them to their position and have all ready, the two coiled ropes had been thrown over the necks of the spies and a miner was upon either side.

"Hello! they've got you, too, pards?" cried one of the prisoners, at sight of them.

Stonefist and Rattler were dismayed, for quickly they had made signs to their comrades not to betray them.

Instantly the Dragoon stepped between them and said to one of the prisoners:

"Yes, I have four of your gang now, as you see; but tell me what are the names of these two?"

"Stonefist and Rattler," was the ready reply.

A perfect howl went up from the men present, and, seeing that Rattler meant to use his revolver, the Dragoon threw himself upon him.

The man was possessed of great strength, but in an instant he was disarmed, while with a revolver held at his head by Landlord Champ, Stonefist gave up his weapons.

It would be impossible to portray the rage of Stonefist and Rattler at their being so cleverly entrapped by the Dragoon, and they uttered the wildest profanity.

The two condemned men seemed to enjoy the situation, for by a strange coincidence an enmity existed between these four, when otherwise, knowing that they were doomed, they might have sworn to no knowledge of the others.

"Gentlemen," said the Dragoon, and instantly there was a dead silence, for the crowd was always pleased when called "gentlemen."

Also, they liked always to hear what the Darling of Destiny had to say.

"Gentlemen, you may have thought it strange that I should have selected two strangers in town as hangmen."

"But I had my motive, as you shall see."

"You remember the little affair that occurred between your esteemed fellow-citizen, Flush Fred, and myself?"

"Well, being anxious to seek revenge upon me he waylaid me in the road."

"It was just after nightfall, and he mistook pine straw in my uniform, mounted upon horseback, for me, and fired."

"I was near, and he was willing to place his hands above his head at my request."

"I did not kill him, but let him go free, and he went to join the Road Raiders."

"Taking a fancy to some horseflesh I have in my stable, he came down during my absence, and these two gentlemen escorted him."

"I have a colored servant, and he was awake, also Bad Luck was on hand, and though the horse-thieves had stolen my horses, they did not get away with them."

"The horse of Flush Fred was killed, and that worthy climbed the sides of the canyon and struck out on foot for the retreat of the Road Raiders."

"The other two dashed by my cabin, and Hannibal followed them."

"He came suddenly upon two horsemen coming toward Gilt Edge City."

"He drew rein and asked them if they had seen two horsemen riding rapidly along that trail, for he was not sure that he had taken the way that the horse-thieves had."

"They had seen nothing of other horsemen than themselves."

"Of course Hannibal had to believe them—then."

"They said they were miners, going to settle in Gilt Edge."

"But Hannibal dogged them, saw them go to a tavern and then he returned."

"At dawn he and Bad Luck were out trailing."

"Hannibal is a good trailer, and cutting a hoof off of the dead horse of Flush Fred he followed its trail."

"It led back through some soft earth, and the three tracks came together at my stable, two horses went back along the trail, turned and came back, halted to talk to Hannibal, and were then tracked to the cavern where these two men stopped."

"This convinced me that they were Road Raiders, sent here on some secret mission, and you have seen, gentlemen, the recognition by them of the prisoners, so there are four, instead of two men to hang, and Judge Champ will appoint the executioners."

The words of the Dragoon were received with cheers, and turning to Mr. Conrad, he said:

"Are you ready to ride home, sir, for my way leads in your direction to-night?"

"You will not wait for the execution, then?"

"Ah, no, for my life causes me to be forced to witness too many sad scenes not to escape those that I can avoid."

"It is to your honor that it is so, Captain Gaston; but I am ready, for I feared I would have to remain."

So the two mounted their horses and rode away, just as the four doomed men were being dragged to the gallows-tree.

As they passed a large boulder near the trail, the Dragoon suddenly wheeled his horse and spurred around it, while he cried:

"Hands up, sir!"

A man sprang to his feet and promptly obeyed, while he cried:

"Ho, Pard Dragoon, it's me, Darby, and I hain't doing nothin'."

"Mr. Darby, I know that you were lying in ambush here to shoot Mr. Conrad and rob him on his way home."

"I am determined to clear Gilt Edge City of just such characters as you are, and I would serve you right if I took you up to The Barracks and let the mob hang you with the four Road Raiders."

"But I will give you a chance."

"You have a good mine, but are too lazy to work it, and this gentleman wishes to buy."

"I don't want ter sell."

"You must, and after breakfast you go to Fort Folly and sell this gentleman your mine."

"You consider it worth two thousand, and he will give you that for it."

"Then, Mr. Darby, just get your traps together, and by sunset be on the trail out of Gilt Edge City."

"I don't want ter go."

"Very well, if you will not take one way you will another."

"Come with me, and I'll give you to the mob, telling your crime, and you make your exit from Gilt Edge City via the Gallows-Tree and the Rock of Ages."

"I'll go, pard."

"Which way?"

"I'll sell out and skip."

"All right, see that you do," and the two rode on, the Dragoon telling Mr. Conrad that a miner came to him and told him Darby was plotting to kill and rob him, and that is why he accompanied him home.

Then bidding Mr. Conrad good-night, the Dragoon rode back by The Barracks, and there in the moonlight beheld the forms of the four Road Raiders hanging in the Gallows-Tree, while the miners were making merry in the saloon.

#### CHAPTER XXIX.

##### BAD LUCK'S STORY.

INSTEAD of looking upon the two extra horses, which his master had brought when carrying the dispatches of the dead sergeant, as so much more trouble to take care of, Hannibal was delighted at the acquisition.

He saw five superb blacks in the stable, any one of them superior to the best horse in Gilt Edge City, unless it was an animal ridden by Landlord Champ, and the one presented to Kate Conrad by the Dragoon.

Not to be caught napping, Hannibal rigged a line across the canyon, so as to be placed at night, and no one knowing of its being there and approaching, either on foot or horseback, caused a gun to be discharged, thus giving the alarm.

The Dragoon congratulated him upon his ingenuity, but advised that he at once post Bad Luck, as otherwise he might give him a severe shock.

Bad Luck was called and initiated into the secret, and then he said:

"Cap'n, I've got suthin' ter say ter you."

"Well, Bad Luck, out with it."

"It's about an old man that were here onc't, as folks called ther Judge."

The Dragoon started, in spite of his great nerve.

"He used ter live in a snug leetle cabin, down on ther creek shore, and a mighty nice man he were."

"He were handsome, had long gray beard and hair, were edicated like a parson, and had leetle ter say to anybody."

"He used ter go through ther mountains looking fer gold, and one day he struck it rich, fer Ribbon Rob said he sent about sixty thousand dollars off East by him."

"Nobody know'd about his mine, and in fact it wasn't know'd he had struck it rich until he went away, when Rob told about it."

"And when did he go away?"

"Last fall."

"And you have never seen him since?"

"No, sir."

"And his mine?"

"Nobody knows about it."

"And his cabin?"

"It's thet I am coming to."

"Did he tell no one good by?"

"Not as I ever heerd of."

"And you knew him well?"

"As well as folks c'u'd know him, fer he wasn't intimate with no one."

"He were kind ter me, and I hoped he'd do well."

"I went ter see him one Sunday, as I sometimes did, and I found he hed gone, and on his door were stuck up a notice on a bit o' paper."

"What did it say?"

"Thet he were gone East on business, and w'u'd come back, and fer no one to distarb his cabin."

"Well, did any one do so?"

"I seen, as he did not come back in a few weeks, thet ther paper was playin' out, so I just tuk my knife, fer I used ter be a wood-carver, and I cut inter ther door, jist what he had writ on ther paper."

"And the paper?"

"I has it in my cabin, cap'n."

"Ah! will you kindly get it for me?"



Bad Luck stumped off to his hut and soon returned with a piece of paper.

It was weather-stained, but the Dragoon readily made out what was written thereon in a bold hand.

He gazed at it a long time and then said:

"Now, Bad Luck, who has gotten the old man's cabin?"

"Two fellers thet jist tuk possession a month ago."

"Miners?"

"Yes, and good miners, but bad men."

"On the shoot, eh?"

"Yes, cap'n, and on ther fight in general, with fist, knife or gun."

"If thet Stonefist hed tackled Bruiser Bill he w'd hev been laid out at once."

"Bruiser Bill is the name of one?"

"Yas, cap'n."

"And the other?"

"Bowie Bill."

"A pair of Bills?"

"Yas, and two of a kind."

"And they have the mine?"

"No, sir, ther cabin."

"Ah, yes; but may they not know where the mine is?"

"Maybe, but it's my idea they tuk ther cabin ter try and find out from what was in it, just whar ther mine is."

"I see."

"Yas, cap'n."

"Did it ever strike you the old man might have been killed?"

"No, sir."

"It might have been so."

"Yas, cap'n, but he left in good faith, and I guess found he had money enough, so did not come back; but it is no reason why his cabin should be taken until the year's out."

"You allow a year here, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then if a mine is not reclaimed others can claim it?"

"Yas, cap'n."

"And the Judge has not been gone that long?"

"Only about half that time."

"Did you speak to this precious pair of Bills about taking the cabin?"

"I did."

"And their reply?"

"That they'd send me to ther Rock o' Ages if I said anything more."

"So you did not?"

"Cap'n, I've got good sense."

"They are as bad as that, are they?"

"Wuss."

"Who was the best friend the Judge had here?"

"I were."

"You can prove that?"

"Waal, he told me ef he died here I wou'd find out all about him from papers he had on his pusson, and fer me ter hev him buried and send ther papers ter ther one it was writ to."

"You did not know who this was?"

"No, sir."

"Well, Bad Luck, these men should leave that cabin."

"Sart'in."

"And they must."

"It hain't healthy makin' 'em."

"I'll place you there, as the friend of the Judge, to keep it until his return."

"I will get a couple of good men to live in your shanty and work the Bad Luck Mine, and remember, your share goes on the same, for I will pay them by the day."

"But you are to take care of the missing man's cabin."

"Cap'n, you'll go with me ter take hold?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then it's a go; but I w'u'dn't go thar and order them Bills out ef half Gilt Edge were ter back me up in it."

"I will place your claim before them as the friend of the Judge."

"They won't go."

"I think you are wrong, Bad Luck, for I am convinced that they will."

"Lordy! thar is goin' ter be music," said Bad Luck.

The Dragoon laughed and ordered his horse for the next Sunday morning, when the two men would be almost certain to be found in the house they had usurped.

"We will go together, Bad Luck, and Hannibal will lead a horse carrying your traps."

"I see thet you means I shall go ter stay."

"Yes."

"Thet's ther game, ef it will work."

"I'll see that it does, Bad Luck."

"Thar is goin' ter be music, and somebody's got ter pay ther fiddler," muttered Bad Luck, as he strolled over to his cabin, deeply impressed with the fact that the Darling of Destiny "meant business" where Bruiser and Bowie Bill were concerned.

### CHAPTER XXX.

#### AN AFTERNOON GALLOP.

TRUE to his promise, the Darling of Destiny made an early call upon the new settlers in Fort Folly, going as soon as he supposed that they were comfortably fixed up in their cabin.

He saw as he approached that Mr. Conrad had not been idle, for a stockade-yard of several acres, running out across a small stream to the mountain-base, had been made for the cattle, while the fowls also had comfortable quarters.

Two of the outer cabins had been turned into stables, and a number of horses had been purchased for work on the place and for the spring-wagon and horseback-riding.

Mrs. Conrad never rode horseback, so the spring-wagon was for her especial benefit.

Sylvester Vernon had undertaken to supply the table with game and fish, devoting a few hours each morning to the work, which was sport for him, and he was a successful hunter and fisherman.

The cabin was in perfect condition, and Mrs. Conrad and Kate were delighted with their new home already.

The rooms were large, comfortable and cheerful.

A force of men were at work, still putting on the finishing touches, and the Dragoon was delighted as he rode up to see what a really delightful home they had.

Mr. Conrad met him at the horse-rack, and greeted him warmly, while he said:

"We thought you had forgotten us."

"Oh, no, sir, but I concluded to wait a few days until you got settled."

"Well, we are all right now, and all of us are charmed."

"I told my family of the scene at The Barracks the other night, and also that I owed you my life on the way home."

"Did Darby come, sir?"

"Oh, yes, and I bought the mine, and have good men working it."

"Why, I shall make a fortune here, for there are a score of paying leads that men are too lazy to work, that I can get for a small sum, while, when I have time, I shall go prospecting and hope to strike something rich."

"That man Darby told me, by the way, to tell you he would keep you green in his memory."

"I shall not forget him," was the reply.

"Ribbon Rob came once to see us when last here, and he is a splendid fellow."

"He told me quietly that he was in love with Pink, my daughter's maid."

"There is no finer fellow on the border than Rob, rough in action, but yet as gentle as a woman and as good."

"That is a good character for him; but here is my daughter."

Kate Conrad looked grandly beautiful in her blue cloth suit that fitted her perfectly, and she welcomed the Dragoon in a manner that was most winning.

"I have come to call, Miss Conrad, and also to ask if you care to join me, in a ride I have to make through the mountains this afternoon."

"Gladly will I go, for I have not yet tried my horse; but we dine in a short while, for we are fashionable, you know, even here, as papa likes his dinner at two."

The Dragoon had dined, but he went to the table with the family, and Mr. Conrad opened a bottle of his favorite Madeira in honor of his presence.

Sylvester Vernon had come in with a long string of fish and some game, but he frowned slightly when he found the Dragoon there.

Still, he appeared pleasanter after a while, and in spite of himself became interested in the soldier's conversation, for the Darling of Destiny was a brilliant talker, and his easy manner and charming voice were very fascinating.

"Will you not accompany us, Mr. Vernon?" said the Dragoon, pleasantly, adding:

"I think we would enjoy the ride we will take."

But Vernon declined on the plea of fatigue, and the Dragoon and Kate started off.

"You are a splendid horsewoman, Miss Conrad," said the Dragoon, as he noted her fine seat in the saddle and her perfect control of the Road Raider's horse, which had never before had a lady rider upon him, and was very restive.

"I will soon have my horse understand me, sir, and then we will get along famously together," was the reply.

Then the citizens of Gilt Edge City were treated to a sight they had never seen before, as the Dragoon and Kate dashed through the long street, for the feminine denizens of the camps could be numbered by a score, and a lady and gentleman on horseback were a novelty to be gazed upon, especially where the latter was the now famous Darling of Destiny.

The trail taken by the Dragoon led by the cabin formerly occupied by the Judge, and seated in front of it were two rough-looking men.

They were of the same size, did not look unlike, wore their hair and beard long and were armed to the teeth.

They looked up as the Dragoon and Kate approached, and the scowl they wore showed that their motive was evil.

The Dragoon saluted politely and asked:

"Is this the cabin that was formerly occupied by the old man known as the Judge?"

"What does yer want ter know for?" was the sullen reply.

"I have a reason, sir, and asking you a polite question, I expect a civil reply."

There was something in the calm manner of the Dragoon that commanded respect, perhaps it was the presence of Kate Conrad; but certain it is a civil reply was returned.

"It war his cabin, but it are ourn now."

"Thank you; good-day, gentlemen," and the Dragoon rode on, remarking to Kate as he did so:

"There is a little history about that cabin, Miss Conrad, that I am anxious to solve, and I shall begin next Sunday."

"And that means more trouble?" said Kate somewhat anxiously.

"I fear so, but I hope not."

Then they continued on their ride, making a circuit of the camps by the mountain trails, and coming back on the one that led by the cabin of the Dragoon.

As they turned into this trail, approaching from another they saw a party of horsemen.

"They are troopers—an officer and six men," decided the Dragoon.

The soldiers had come to a halt and were regarding the Dragoon and Kate attentively.

They were travel-stained, and their horses seemed jaded; but they were all well armed.

At a word from their commander, who wore a lieutenant's uniform, they unslung their carbines for use, and as the Dragoon approached, the words rung out clear and sharp:

"Halt, sir! my men have you covered, and I arrest you as a deserter from the army!"

### CHAPTER XXXI.

#### RIBBON ROB'S PASSENGER.

RIBBON ROB had as a passenger over the Overland, on his second run after having carried over the Conrad party, a person who took a seat on the box alongside of him.

He was pretty well dressed, and at a glance Ribbon Rob set him down as a "tenderfoot," unused to the ways of the border.

"Which way bound, pilgrim?" he asked, after they had rolled away from the station and the stranger had not spoken.

"To the mines."

"What mines?"

"Gold mines."

"Which one?"

"There's a Gilt Edge City that you go through?"

"Yes."

"I'm going there."

"What for?"

"To make a fortune."

"No!"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Digging gold."

"You hain't been West before?"

"No."

"You'll have to keep yer eyes skinned, or yer'll be tuk in."

"Taken in where?"

"Tuk in fer a darned fool."

"I am not a fool."

Ribbon Rob looked at him dubiously.

After awhile he said:

"I tell you, pard, Gilt Edge City is a bad place, and if you was doing a good business elsewhere, you had oughter stuck to it."

"They kills men thar every day, half ther fellers in ther camps has got the'r private graveyards, and no man sleeps without his boots on and his belt o' weepens."

"If they thinks you is green they'll go fer yer, and if you has money they'll rob yer."

"I've got a little money to take care of myself with until I find gold."

"Whar's yer gun?"

"What gun?"

"Yer shootin'-irons?"

"Oh! do I have to have sich things?"

Ribbon Rob looked at him pityingly.

"Do you have to have sich things?"

"Does yer hev ter eat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, guns is more necessary in Gilt Edge City than is grub."

"I want to know."

"Waal, yer will know, and my advice is fer yer ter get a belt o' weepens, soon as yer strike town."

"I will, thank you, sir."

He was a fine-looking young fellow, but Rob pitied his ignorance and wished to be kind to him.

So he told him all about the Darling of Destiny, Rob's favorite topic of conversation, the murders that had been committed, the duels fought, the hangings, and the Overland perils, until he got the young fellow's eyes to staring like saucers.

"Here is whar I've been stopped half a hundred times, and Gilt Edge City is jist five miles beyond in the valley," said Ribbon Rob.

"I guess I'll go back," said the young man in a trembling voice.

"Go whar?"

"Back again."

"Whar's that?"

"Home."



"What fer?"  
 "Well, I don't think I'll like it here, sir, and—"  
 "Nonsense, pard; yer won't like heaven until yer gits us't to it, and acquainted."  
 "But I will go back, so please come to a halt."  
 "Do you mean you'll walk back?"  
 "Yes, sir."  
 "You is the durndest fool I ever see."  
 "I know it, sir; but I must go."  
 "I will go back ag'in day after to-morrow."  
 "No, I'll go now."  
 "Sit down and don't git excited."  
 "If you don't let me git down, I'll jump, sir."

"Pard, I were jokin' with yer, for Gilt Edge City are ther healthiest place on 'arth—'ceptin' purgatory," and the last two words Ribbon Rob said to himself.

"No, I'm young, I'm innocent, and unused to the wicked ways of such people as you tell about, so I will go back."

"Sit down, for yonder is whar the Road Raiders stopped us ther day ther Dragoon scooped two of 'em in."

"We'll be thar in a minute."

"Then lend me one of your guns, lend it to me, please," cried the young man, now all of a tremor with fright.

"I'll do it, ter soothe yer, but like as not yer'll shoot me or yerself with it," and Rob drew the revolver on his right hip.

The young man took it with trembling hands, while Rob said:

"Durned ef I believe yer know which end goes off."

"Yes, I know a little about guns; but this is a revolver."

"Yes, we call 'em all guns out here."

"Is it loaded, sir?"

"Does yer take me fer ther blasted fool you is, young feller?"

"Oh, no, sir; but I'll get back here, sir," and he climbed up on top of the stage.

Then, quick as a flash he jerked the other revolver out of Ribbon Rob's belt, and leveling one at him cried sternly:

"Draw rein, Ribbon Rob!"

Rob thought a Road Raider had spoken; but a glance, and he took in the situation.

"Draw rein, sir!"

Ribbon Rob obeyed.

Then came the words that proved to Ribbon Rob that he had picked up the wrong man for a fool:

"Ribbon Rob, you got a package of a thousand dollars at the station to-day, to pay off the men at your end of the line."

"I've been off on a little business trip, and have been a trifle extravagant, so I'll trouble you for that thousand dollars."

"Who is yer?" gasped Ribbon Rob.

"I am the lieutenant of Captain Brass, the Road Raider chief."

"Waal, ef I hain't ther durndest fool on 'arth, jist shoot me."

"Here's ther money, and by ther time I makes it good I'll kinder know green from red when I sees it."

The young Road Raider laughed, took the money which Ribbon Rob threw on the top of the coach, and then slid down over the rear to the ground.

"Here, Rob, as guns are such necessary articles in Gilt Edge City, I will not take yours from you, but place them on yonder rock for you to come and get, as I am pretty well provided myself."

As he spoke he unbuttoned his loose sack coat and revealed a belt-of-arms beneath.

"Lordy, lordy! jist shoot one o' my fingers off, pard, when I holds it up, thet I may be set in remembrance of my bein' a born fool."

"No, you'll remember me without that, Rob; but give my love to the Darling of Destiny, whom I am anxious to meet, and accept my thanks for your entertaining stories."

"I his is my way home. Good-by."

He turned into the trail leading over the ridge as he spoke, placed Ribbon Rob's revolvers upon a rock, and with a wave of his hand walked briskly away, disappearing in the gloom of the timber.

Dismounting from the box Rob got his weapons and then drove on to Gilt Edge City a sadder and a wiser man.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE PLOTTERS.

THE young man who had so cleverly fooled Ribbon Rob went on through the timber at a rapid pace.

He seemed to know the trail well, and as he went along wore no shadow upon his face to mark the fact that his life was stained with crime.

He had gone half a dozen miles when the sun set, but this did not seem to disturb him, and even when the darkness came he held on at the same brisk pace.

It was some time after dark when he came to a steep hillside, and up this he climbed, though with some difficulty.

Then a walk of a quarter of a mile brought him to the head of the little valley in the mountain-top, where the Road Raiders had their camp.

There were several camp-fires burning brightly, and toward one of these he made his way.

It was the one in front of the chief's cabin. "Hello! Dudley, back again?" cried the chief, who was in his easy-chair, reading by the glow of the firelight.

"Yes, sir, I am back again."

"I was beginning to get anxious about you."

"No need of it, for I got through all right, captain."

"And you went to the places I sent you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Gained all the information I wanted?"

"All, I think."

"Good."

"I think my trip was successful, sir."

"Your money held out?"

"Well, not exactly; but I won a little at poker one night in a hotel, and again I made a gentleman stand and deliver."

"You took big chances to play highwayman in the East, Frank Dudley."

"I took the chances of going to jail; here I take the chance of a rope."

"True, and I'll not scold as you were successful; but how did you come back?"

"Took the stage and came over to the Pass with Ribbon Rob."

"Curse that fellow."

The young man laughed, and then he told his chief of the joke he had played upon Rob.

Captain Brass laughed heartily, and said:

"I am avenged, Dudley, and I thank you."

"Why, that will nearly kill that dandy driver with mortification."

"Well, he will not be pleased over it, I am sure."

"I would give much to hear him tell the story."

"If he tells it."

"Oh, he'll do it, for he's honest, anyhow."

"I'd kill him, only I like the fellow, and what is more, he's got the pluck to run the road where others would not."

"He told me some news."

"Well?"

"You have had a hard time since I left?"

"Rather."

"You have lost two men?"

"Well, I should think so, and more."

"More?"

"Yes, for that accursed Dragoon killed Tiger Tom and drove Flush Fred out of the camps, so I had to send two more spies there."

"Then he cleverly captured two a few days ago."

"And hanged them."

"Ha! do you know this?"

"Ribbon said so."

"He hanged them, then?"

"Yes, he gave them a fair trial by a jury, chosen by lot, and with the landlord of The Barracks as judge."

"Well, poor fellows, it was hard on them; but we must expect it."

"And your other two went also?"

"What others?"

"Stonefist and Rattler."

"They are in Gilt Edge City as spies."

"Yes, upon the hill."

"What do you mean?"

"They occupy snug quarters in the Rock of Ages!"

"Dead?"

"Hanged."

"How and where?"

"Oh, it was the Darling of Destiny, according to Ribbon Rob's story."

"How?"

"Flush Fred made a raid on his stable?"

"Yes, and failed."

"Lost his horse?"

"Yes."

"The Dragoon's negro cut off the leg from the horse, followed the trail, tracked Stonefist and Rattler as being with him, and they put on airs one night, Stonefist got in some of his sledge-hammer knocks, and then tackled the Dragoon and got floored."

"Impossible!"

"Ribbon Rob said that the Dragoon just warded off Stonefist's blow and with one straight from the shoulder, dealt our man one in the face that spoiled his beauty and knocked him senseless."

"I cannot understand it."

"Nor could Stonefist; but the Dragoon had his eye on the two, and brought them face to face with the other pair of Road Raiders, recognitions followed, and the four were hanged in a row."

"Great God!"

"This Dragoon means business."

"He does indeed."

"Can't we capture him?"

"I guess so; but it will not be easy work."

"No, sir."

"I am in a quandary what to do, for four of our best men are gone, and we have not had much luck of late."

"That is true, captain."

"I will think over what is best, and then we will act, Dudley."

"Yes, sir."

"In the mean time the men must keep close in camp and it will be thought that the hanging of those four men has frightened us off."

"There is too much money looming up before us, captain, for us to be scared off by a few deaths."

"Yes, there is, and I have a plan by which I think we can make a big haul."

"How is that?"

"Well, it needs work in Gilt Edge City to do it; but I have not thought it all out yet."

"When I do, I will tell you and then we will act."

"But in the mean time I will not allow a man to leave camp, nor stop a coach, and it will make us stronger when we do strike."

"It certainly will."

"Now go and give orders that not a man shall leave the retreat, and then come back and we will look over the report you bring of your work East for me."

The Road Raider lieutenant departed, and returning, until after midnight the two were in the cabin talking in low earnest tones, plotting some plan of evil toward others.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### UNDER GUARD.

WHEN the young lieutenant uttered the words that he did to the Dragoon, that he arrested him as a deserter from the army, Kate Conrad uttered a slight cry of alarm.

But both she and the Dragoon drew rein.

The six cavalymen were in line, with their carbines leveled full at the heart of the Dragoon, and the young lieutenant had his sword drawn, so that resistance on the part of the man who called himself Earl Gaston was utterly out of the question.

Seeing soldiers, he had not expected any trouble, and he had not had an instant in which to draw a weapon.

At the words of the officer the Dragoon's eyes flashed fire, and for a moment he looked as though he meant to charge upon his accuser; but almost instantly his face changed, and with a smile he said in his pleasant way:

"Pardon me, sir, but there is a mistake here."

"No, there is not a mistake, sir, and, begging this lady's pardon, I must hold you under arrest, for I am sent from the command to do so."

"On what charge?"

"Desertion and—"

"Go on, sir, for I wish to know the full charge against me."

"Desertion and murder."

"Ah! so bad as that, is it?"

"Yes, and you take it cool enough."

"It is my way, sir; but will you ride on with me until I escort this lady home, and then I will go with you."

"You must be ironed, sir, and two of my men shall see the lady home."

The eyes of the Dragoon fairly flamed; but he said, calmly:

"I asked this lady to ride with me, sir, and I shall return her in safety to her home."

"You are at liberty to follow me, as close as you please, but I am not to be dictated to, nor will I be, in this matter, though you are seven to one."

The lieutenant looked at the bold man, and replied:

"As I desire no trouble before this lady, you can do as you will; but the slightest attempt on your part to escape will be your death-knell, I warn you."

The Dragoon responded:

"I am not one to attempt anything of the kind."

"Shall we continue our ride, Miss Conrad?"

She gazed at him in wonder, for every trace of annoyance had gone from his face, and, as they rode along together she had found him more entertaining.

Close behind them rode the lieutenant, and two by two in his rear, came the six troopers, all with their carbines ready for use on the instant.

Thus they passed through Gilt Edge City to the amazement of the denizens, and they were more convinced than ever that the Dragoon had not come to the mining-camps without strong backing and for some good cause.

They did not understand the situation as it was.

Had they suspected that the Dragoon had been charged with desertion and murder the seven cavalymen would never have left Gilt Edge City, had they attempted to carry off the Darling of Destiny with them.

Past The Barracks they went at a gallop, the tired soldiers and horses looking longingly at a place where there was rest and food.

As they dashed by, the half-hundred men gathered there gave the Dragoon three rousing cheers, which the lieutenant and his men took for themselves, and the former raised his hat and the Darling of Destiny did the same, for he knew whom the men were honoring.



Taking the trail that led through the Rock of Ages graveyard, the Dragoon said:

"I came this way, Miss Conrad, thinking that you would like to see a mining-camp cemetery."

"I have been anxious to do so; but how can you, with the shadow upon you that those men have brought, care to go through such a place?"

"Every cloud has a silver lining, it is said, Miss Conrad, and I do not stay under the shadows until I have to."

"See, here begins our burying-ground, and you can see that it is unique, like our people."

"There is one thing they hasten to do here, and that is to at once put the name of the dead at the head of his grave, that is, the names by which they are known here."

"There, for instance, you see that Panther Pete, who forced me to kill him the night of your arrival at The Barracks, already has his head-board."

"Not far off yonder is Tiger Tom, a desperado whom I was forced to kill."

"Just read the inscription on the head-board, please."

They drew rein, and Kate read aloud:

"Here lies

"TIGER TOM.

"He tackled ther Darlin' o' Destiny one night, and he tarning up his toes accordin'."

The above was a fair specimen of all the inscriptions, and passing a group of graves, four newly made, the Dragoon said:

"Those are the Road Raiders' graves, Miss Conrad."

"The four that were hanged the other night, sir?"

"Yes; and you see their inscription reads:

"ROAD RAIDERS.

"Died of Rope-Fever.

"Wicked men be warned."

Kate Conrad looked into the face of the man who so calmly passed the graves of Panther Pete and Tiger Tom, men he had killed, and of the four Road Raiders he had brought to the gallows.

What he felt he did not show, and she wondered greatly.

The lieutenant had heard all that had been said, and he, too, gazed upon the Dragoon in a strange kind of way.

A short ride further brought them to Fort Folly, and springing to the ground the Dragoon aided Kate to alight.

"I will see you again, for surely this charge against you is a mistake?" she said, anxiously, holding out her hand.

"Oh yes, I will come again soon for another ride."

"Good-night."

He raised his hat, leaped into his saddle, and said:

"Now, lieutenant, I am at your service."

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### THE DESERTER.

THE young officer, who commanded the troop of cavalry, seemed a trifle surprised at the free-and-easy manner in which the Dragoon placed himself alongside of him, as they left Fort Folly, and said:

"Now, sir, we will go to quarters, where you and your men will be cared for and can rest."

"We have had a long jaunt after you, and we are all tired," was the reply.

"I am sorry I gave you that extra ride up to Fort Folly, for we passed our stopping-place; but you considered it necessary, and so I said nothing."

"And where is it you intend to stop, sir?"

"At my cabin, for I wish you as my guest, and can take good care of your men, too."

"Your cabin?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have a cabin here, then, already?"

"Yes, sir."

"I prefer to go to the tavern, and you are to go with me, for the courtesy I showed you awhile ago was on account of your having a lady with you."

"You can go to The Barracks, sir, if so you wish, but I go to my home."

"My orders are peremptory, my man, and you must go with me, dead or alive."

"My dear lieutenant, I told you before that you were mistaken in your man, and I asked you to go to my cabin that I might so prove to you."

"I am not mistaken, sir; I feel sure."

"May I ask what deserter you are looking for?"

"You."

"Be careful, lieutenant, for it is never pleasant to have to eat one's words."

"Ha! do you threaten?"

"I wish you would explain to me, and it is my right, who it is you desire to arrest, for I tell you again you are mistaken in supposing me to be the one you seek."

"I seek, sir, a sergeant of cavalry, one who

was respected and trusted by his officers, but who, hating one, took advantage of his having been sent on a special duty bearing dispatches, and by night crept back and shot his superior as he lay in bed."

"He was seen, and by several who recognized him, while the trail of his horse showed that he had returned."

"A letter coming to him was opened, and it was in answer to one he had written, in which he said he would desert the service as soon as he found an opportunity to kill the officer alluded to and escape without detection."

"Did you ever see this sergeant?"

"No."

"Do any of your men know him?"

"No, they do not, for our command came to the fort the day after he departed, and I was given a description of him and sent in pursuit."

"And your description tallies with my appearance, sir?"

"Yes, very closely, and more, it was said that he wore away a cavalry sergeant's uniform, while he belonged to the infantry, and had had made an officer's undress uniform without mark of rank, such as you wear."

"Ah! was the name of this sergeant Ross Duncan?"

"Yes, he formerly belonged to the cavalry."

"And his dispatches were addressed to Captain Alfred Taylor, scouting?"

"Yes, sir, and as we came along I made inquiries, as I could, and was told there was such a man stopping at Gilt Edge City, so, meeting you, and seeing also the horse you ride, which is also minutely described in my orders, I felt that we had found our man."

"This horse is the one the sergeant rode away from the fort, sir, and I will tell you that the dispatches he carried were safely delivered to Captain Taylor."

"Who delivered them?"

"I did."

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are not the Sergeant Deserter?"

"Just ride with me up this trail to the burying-ground yonder and I will answer your question, sir."

The Dragoon turned into the trail leading to the Rock of Ages and drew rein near a new-made grave.

It was growing twilight, but the officer and his men read on the white head-board, painted in black letters:

"TO THE MEMORY

of

ROSS DUNCAN,

A Sergeant in the U. S. Army.

"Killed May 2d, 18—, while in the discharge of his duty."

"What does this mean?" asked the mystified lieutenant.

"It means that the man you seek lies there."

"Dead?"

"Certainly, or he would not be in his grave."

"You have proof of this, sir?"

"Lieutenant, accept my offer of hospitality for yourself and men, and I will give you all the proof you wish, while, as we ride toward my home I will tell you how the sergeant lost his life."

"I am mystified, sir, but somehow I am inclined to accept your invitation."

"I am glad to hear you say so, and we will press forward at a gallop."

Arriving at the cabin, Bad Luck was there to show the men where to put their horses, while the Dragoon called out:

"Hannibal, we want the best supper you can get for us, and I have seven guests with me."

Hannibal flew around lively, while the Dragoon led the officer into his quarters, saying as he did so:

"I have not the honor of your name, sir."

"My name is Henry Ames, sir, and I am a first lieutenant of the —th cavalry."

"And, lieutenant, if you will glance at these papers, you will see that I am entitled to belief."

He placed some official-looking papers in the hands of Lieutenant Ames as he spoke, and with one look at them, he cried:

"My dear sir, I humbly beg your pardon, and—"

"Do not refer to it, sir, for appearances were against me; but kindly remember I am not to be known to others than yourself, for—"

"I understand, sir, and I will be careful; but I am really delighted to know you, and beg again your forgiveness for my treatment of you."

"It is granted, but here comes your men," and turning to them the Dragoon said:

"Men, your commander has found out that I am not the deserter sergeant after all; but make yourselves at home, and we will soon have supper."

And such a supper as Hannibal set before them the soldiers did not forget for many a day, for rank was set aside, and the men were invited to sit down with the Dragoon and their lieutenant.

Worn out with fatigue, they all retired early, and the next morning Lieutenant Ames started upon his return to report how the deserter had met his death.

Hardly had the troopers ridden away when Ribbon Rob put in an appearance.

His face wore an expression that caused the Dragoon to see that he had something to tell.

"I got in yesterday, Pard Dragoon, and w'u'd hev come over last night, but heerd how yer hed soldier comp'ny, and the boys do say you is a general in disguise; but I has suthin' ter tell yer."

"I believe you are in love, Rob."

"Pard, I'm gittin' thar pow'fu' suddint, fer thet leetle petticoat critter, Pink, hes got an awful winnin' way about her."

"I went thar last night when I found your friends were here."

"And enjoyed yourself, too, I'll warrant."

"Yes, as much as I kin jist now; but I am down in ther mouth."

"What is the matter, Rob?"

"I'm a fool."

"Half the world suffer from the same complaint, Rob."

"But thar hain't a bigger fool than me born."

"Why, what is the matter, Rob, for you really seem worried."

"Pard, I are worried."

"But what about?"

"'Cause I is a fool."

The Dragoon laughed, and Ribbon Rob went on to say:

"Now I had a passenger in thet old hearse yesterday thet I thought were so green ther cows w'u'd chase him."

"I felt sorry fer ther young pilgrim, and I told him he'd 'a' better stayed at home."

"Then I told him stories of ther road and Gilt Edge City until his hair seemed ter git like hog-bristles."

"At last he said he hed ter go back, w'u'd walk, and was in a hurry ter start, and we was drawin' nigh whar you roped in ther two Road Raiders then."

"Waal, cap'n, he got thet skeert, as he looked, thet I felt sorry fer him and let him take one o' my guns."

"Quick as a flash he tuk t'other one from my belt, covered me with it, and jist told me he were lieutenant o' ther Road Raiders, and asked me ter give up a thousand dollars I had ter pay ther men off at this end of the line."

"I gave it to him, and he wished me good-day, left my revolvers on a rock and walked off, serene as a parrot."

"Now, hain't I a fool?"

The Dragoon laughed heartily at Rob's story and manner, and then told him every one was liable to be taken in, while he continued:

"Now, Rob, I know you have only a few hundred dollars saved up, so let me lend you the thousand, and you can pay it back at your leisure."

"Pard, you'll be an Angel Dragoon in heaven some day," and he grasped the hand of the Darling of Destiny, who gave him the money and then said:

"I am sorry you will not be here on Sunday, Ribbon Rob."

"Why so, pard?"

"Do you know two men known as Bowie Bill and Bruiser Bill?"

"I does, and you jist go slow with 'em, Pard Dragoon, for they is vicious as a Government mule and treacherous as snakes, while they has ther narve ter back 'em up."

"Well, they have taken possession of an old miner's cabin in his absence, and I intend they shall give it up."

"Then thar will be music on Sunday, sartin," was Ribbon Rob's energetic remark.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### TWO OF A KIND.

SUNDAY in Gilt Edge City was not ushered in by the ringing of Church-bells, as the reader can well imagine.

As it was a day of rest, the miners were careful to be deserving of rest, and many of them caroused until dawn, knowing that they could sleep away the hours.

There was no church in Gilt Edge City, because there was no parson.

Had there been, the citizens would have been charmed, for then they would have had somebody to bury their dead.

What he lacked in marriages he could have made up in funerals, and he would have had little time for other parochial duties.

Had he preached, he would have always had a crowded "audience," and he would have been respected, too.

There were no schools, because there were no children; no marriages had occurred, for there had been none of the gentler sex there, with the exception of a few women on the shady side of forty, until Mr. Conrad's family arrived.

Having seen Kate Conrad, and also, Pink, every young miner in the camps spruced himself up for Sunday, hoping to catch a glimpse of them, and give them a glimpse of themselves.



Such was the condition of affairs in Gilt Edge City at the time of which I write.

On the Sabbath Day that the Dragoon had appointed to oust the two Bills from the old miner's cabin, he arose rather late, ate his breakfast without a seeming thought of the large undertaking before him, and then took a careful survey of his weapons.

These seemed to be to his liking, and so he sent for Bad Luck.

The miner was ready, dressed in his best, and he had his pack of things to carry with him, all ready to strap upon a horse.

Hannibal led out from the stable four animals.

One was his master's, another for Bad Luck, a third for the pack, and Hannibal was to ride the fourth.

All being in readiness, they started for the cabin.

Bad Luck was to ride up, dismount and tell the men that he had come to take charge of the cabin for the absent miner.

If they attacked him, then the Dragoon was to be on hand.

Arriving near the cabin, they saw the two Bills seated out in front.

They were dressed in their best, and several miners were near, seated on a log, for the two usurpers had doubtless told them that they were expecting visitors.

Riding boldly up to the cabin, Bad Luck dismounted, and said, by way of breaking the ice:

"Mornin', pards."

"Well, old gameleg, what's wantin'?" said Bruiser Bill, rudely.

"Pards, I hev come ter hev a leetle talk with yer about this cabin."

"You needn't waste yer breath, old gameleg."

"But I wants yer ter know that ther Judge were my friend, and he left here and stuck up a notice on his door to ther effect he were coming back."

"I carved his own wordin' inter ther door, and thar it is, and I asks yer ter go away and let me keep it fer my friend."

The two men laughed rudely, and one said, glancing at the Dragoon, who was waiting out in the trail with Hannibal:

"Now, yer thinks yer kin come here and scare us; but yer is awful mistaken, fer we don't skeer a bit, and I tells yer ter git, and git lively."

"I hev come ter stay, pards," boldly said Bad Luck.

The answer was for Bowie Bill to get up, step quickly toward the old man and raise his hand to strike him.

But the blow did not fall, as, with the sharp crack of a revolver the doubled fist was shattered by a bullet.

"Coward! would you dare to strike a man like that?"

"Come and hit me!"

The Dragoon had spurred forward and sprung from his horse to confront the men.

As he did so Bruiser Bill called out:

"Are it guns or fists, pard, you wants ter hev it out with?"

"Either," was the cool reply.

"You mash him, Bruiser, and I'll knife him, fer he hev shattered my hand!" yelled Bowie Bill.

"Men, you have no right to this cabin, and as you would not leave it at that man's request, I will force you to do so," sternly said the Dragoon.

"I kin do a leetle forcin', too, pard, so ef yer wants ter knuckles up with me, jist come on, or say guns, and guns it are: but I am Bruiser Bill, I am, and I jist wants ter spile thet pretty face you hev and let yer feel my fist."

"I'm Bruiser Bill, I am, and I'm comin' fer yer."

As he spoke he made a spring toward the Dragoon, his hands raised in perfect pugilistic style, while Bowie Bill was nursing his wounded hand and cursing.

Seeing this the Dragoon called out:

"Hannibal, come and look after this coward's hand, while I punish his comrade as he deserves."

"Punish Bruiser Bill, will yer? Take that!"

He aimed a blow directly at the face of the Dragoon, and with a power that would have been terrible in its result had he hit him.

But the Dragoon dodged the blow, and quickly gave his adversary a body blow that knocked him completely down.

The bully was amazed, and enraged he sprung to his feet and rushed upon his enemy, thinking there was some mistake.

But again his blow was skillfully warded, and once more the Dragoon's small firm fist did service, this time in the face of the bully.

It was a stunner, and Bruiser Bill sat down heavily.

"What in thunder ails yer? go at him ag'in!" yelled Bowie Bill, as Hannibal was dressing his wounded hand, and at the same time watching the pugilistic encounter, for the negro enjoyed a scientific set-to with bare knuckles, and Bruiser was scioned, as he had been a champion prize-fighter, until he killed an adversary with one of his terrific blows and had to fly for his life.

But the Dragoon's education at fisticuffs did not seem to have been in the least neglected.

As the men standing about laughed at Bruiser Bill's second knock-down, he became livid with rage, and, urged on by Bowie Bill's words, he again sprung at his foe.

But again he was promptly met and once more his bleeding face caught the full force of the Dragoon's blow.

Down went the desperado, and he was badly staggered, for he rose with difficulty.

"Better decide to give up the cabin, for I do not care to punish either of you more," said the Darling of Destiny quietly.

"Give it up! Well, yes, this way!"

As Bruiser Bill spoke, or rather shrieked the words, he dropped his hand upon his revolver.

But it never left the holster, for the sharp crack of a pistol was heard, followed by a shriek from the desperado, as his arm dropped helpless to his side.

"Do not force me to kill you— Ha! up with your hands, or I fire!"

The words rung out and Bowie Bill, who had suddenly put his hand on a revolver, as quickly went down under a blow from Hannibal, while Bruiser Bill's unhurt hand, which was at his hip, went up into the air, for he loved life.

"Now, men, let my colored comrade dress your wounds, and then tramp, for this cabin you shall not remain in."

"What belongs to you, you can take, but nothing else."

"Will you go, or will you force me to kill you?"

As the last word left his lips there came a sharp report followed by a second one, and a bullet clipped the flesh as it sped by the temple of the Dragoon, for Bowie Bill had, from his recumbent position managed to get hold of his pistol and fire.

But it was his last shot, for Bad Luck standing near, had seen his act, and he sent a bullet into his brain.

"Great God! I'm done fer, pard, so don't shoot me!" cried Bruiser Bill.

"I do not intend to unless you force me to it."

"Come, let Hannibal look at your wound, and then be off, and remember, I mean for you to leave Gilt Edge City."

"I has a mine here, and thar lies my poor pard—"

"What is your mine worth?"

"Three thousand, cash."

"I will buy it from you, and if you set foot in Gilt Edge City after to-morrow, you will rue it."

"You pay me ther money for my mine, and bury my Pard Bill, and I'll go."

"It is a bargain," was the ready answer, and anxious not to show his face in Gilt Edge City after his defeat, Bruiser Bill allowed Hannibal to dress his arm, which had received a flesh-wound near the shoulder, and with his traps slung on a stick over his shoulder, and his pay for his mine in his pocket—for Hannibal had ridden to the cabin to get it—he set out on foot to shake off the dust of the town.

But he went off as bad Flush Fred and Darby, vowing vengeance against the Darling of Destiny.

"Now, Bad Luck, you are in charge of this cabin, and I wish you to see that this body is buried this afternoon."

"Here is money for expenses, and to treat the boys, who will doubtless all turn out, as it is Sunday."

So saying, the Darling of Destiny, without entering the cabin, mounted his horse, and, accompanied by Hannibal, set out on his return to his home.

Arriving there he saw Mr. Conrad and Kate just riding up to his door, the maiden having urged her father to go over with her to his cabin and ask him to join them in a Sunday dinner, for she was anxious about the termination of the affair, which the reader will remember he had told her would occur on the Sabbath.

In regard to his having been arrested as a deserter, she also knew nothing more than that the young lieutenant and his troopers had left Gilt Edge City, and that the Dragoon still remained.

"I must know more of this strange man, and I must know what this Sunday morning has brought forth," she said to herself, and then it was she had urged her father to accompany her to the Dragoon's cabin to invite him to dinner.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### A PARSON ARRIVES IN GILT EDGE CITY.

ON his next run over, Ribbon Rob brought a passenger that certainly was welcome in Gilt Edge City.

He was a man of good physique, and had a clean-shaven face.

Large gold-rimmed spectacles gave him a benign, as well as a scholastic air, and this was added to by his dress, which was that of a clergyman.

In fact, he was a full-fledged border missionary, trying to do his duty to benighted Indian or miner, and he had drifted into Gilt Edge City at the suggestion of Ribbon Rob.

Rob had met him at the station, and had

been charmed with his manner of conversation, so had said:

"Whar is yer hangin' out now, parson?"

"I go wherever I can do the most good to my fellow-man," was the reply.

"Wal, thar be a lot o' your fellow-men in Gilt Edge City that needs ther Gospil driven into 'em with a hammer, and I guesses thet are ther vin'yard fer yer ter work in."

"How far is it, my friend?"

"Wal, I'll run yer free over thar, if ver cares ter go and tackle ther lostsouls o' ther Gilt Edge community."

"Thar is buryin' ter do in plenty, and yer might sling Gospil at 'em on a Sunday."

"I'll go, for I feel that I am called there."

"Enough then, Pard Parson."

"I goes out in half an hour, so jist git yer traps and take a seat up with me, ef it won't make yer dizzy."

Thus came into Gilt Edge City Parson 'Zekiel Prim, and Landlord Champ gave him a good welcome, while a hush seemed to fall upon the frequenters at The Barracks at the thought that they were to have a parson in their midst.

It seemed too much good luck for Gilt Edge City.

Landlord Champ had the interest of the place at heart, and he knew if Gilt Edge City was known to be less wicked and desperate than many more good people would come there and the camps would grow into a town, and he had a shrewd head for speculation in the future.

He found the parson a pleasant fellow, a little given to drawling his words with a pious twang and apparently knowing little beyond the Gospel and converts.

He spied the Chinese servants, caught sight of Hannibal as he passed with some groceries, saw a couple of Indians, whom Champ kept as hunters and fishermen for The Barracks, and then glanced around at the motley crowd of miners.

"I've a great field here, Brother Champ, a great field, and I'll have Chinese, Indian, negro and whites all attending service before long."

Landlord Champ hoped so, but doubted it.

Still he did his share when he said:

"I'll give you a room and board free, parson, for six months, and you can see how you like it here."

"Then, if you thrive, we can build you a little cabin and church."

This seemed to please the parson greatly, and, interested in the new man in Gilt Edge, the landlord rode over with him to call upon the Dragoon.

He was given a cordial greeting by the young soldier, and handed fifty dollars to start him in his new work.

Then Fort Folly was visited, and Mrs. Conrad, ever an enthusiast in good deeds, entered heart and soul into the cause of the parson and promised to build him a church herself.

He was invited to come over when he pleased, and to make use of the really fine library of Mr. Conrad as though it were his own.

Thus it was that Gilt Edge City seemed to be taking a new departure.

Mr. Conrad had settled down to business, and he had purchased half a score of mines and hired good men at fair prices to work them.

The Dragoon also had three mines in which he had placed good miners, and Landlord Champ had fallen into the same way, so that there was no need of idlers in the town, as work could be had if they wanted it.

Bad Luck had not been disturbed in his cabin of the old miner, and having bought a horse, he rode daily to the Bad Luck Mine to do his share of work.

Glad to show the parson around, Landlord Champ exhibited to him all of these improvements of a few weeks in Gilt Edge City, and then felt that he had done his duty by the parson as a starter in his new field of usefulness.

The parson seemed charmed with Gilt Edge City; rough miners saluted him politely, he was asked to "take suthin'" a hundred times a day, and he never lost a chance to throw in a little good advice about the "intoxicating bowl."

He seemed anxious to select a site for his church, and rode and walked over the entire valley.

He bought the best horse in Landlord Champ's stable, on credit, and upon the principle that "when in Rome do as the Romans do," he secured a belt-of-arms to wear under his ecclesiastical coat, for he was told that he might be "dropped on" at a moment's notice.

He did not seem to understand just what being "dropped on" meant, but he was willing to follow the advice of all and prepare against such an emergency.

Hence he wore a couple of revolvers and a knife, and slung by a strap to the same belt were a Bible and hymn book.

Such was the entrance of Parson Prim into Gilt Edge City, and already the camps seemed the better for his coming, and Ribbon Rob was delighted at what he had done for the benighted people of the community.

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

##### THE PARSON "CATCHES ON."

IT was the Sunday following the exit of Bruiser Bill from the camps, and Bowie Bill's



death, that the Dragoon mounted his horse and rode over to see Bad Luck at the cabin of the old miner, who had so mysteriously disappeared.

During the week the Dragoon had been busy in locking after his mines, and also in aiding Mr. Conrad to get settled in his business affairs.

Of course they knew at Fort Folly all about the driving out of the two Bills from the cabin of the absent miner, and Sylvester Vernon was inclined to slur upon the Dragoon and say that he was as great a desperado as any in town.

Kate defended him warmly, however, and thus a *casus belli* was originated between these two.

That the secretary did not like him, the Dragoon seemed to at once detect; but he still was most courteous to Vernon, and appeared not to notice the change.

When Mrs. Conrad had "gushed" over the coming of the parson, and the good work he was going to do, the Dragoon had said simply: "I do not like him."

This seemed to annoy Mrs. Conrad, and she asked the reasons of the Dragoon for his dislike.

"I do not think he is sincere, and he will be of little use here unless he is really good."

"Let these people suspect that he is as bad as they are, and he will not have an atom of influence with them."

"But you do not think he is a bad man, Captain Gaston?"

"I do not think he is a good man, Mrs. Conrad."

"It is prejudice, for I think he is a most excellent man, and I am sure he will soon put an end to this reckless killing and outlawry that is carried on here from seemingly a love of excitement," remarked Sylvester Vernon.

The Dragoon knew that this was a hit at him from the secretary, but he answered quietly:

"No clergyman, no law, Mr. Vernon, will ever prevent a man from defending his life, his property, and risking all in the cause of justice."

"Do you maintain that the killing in this place is just?"

"There is no law here, but that of might and right, and the weak must defend themselves against the strong."

"There are many cases of deaths that occur when a difficulty is recklessly sought, or brought on; but in most cases they are in self-defense, and that is the first law of nature."

"Still, I do not believe that Parson Prim is the man to regulate such things, and without wishing to turn prophet I am sure you will find it so."

But Mrs. Conrad was a firm believer in the parson, Vernon upheld him because the Dragoon opposed him, Mr. Conrad said he would not judge him until he saw how he "panned out," and Kate expressed her opinion decidedly: "I believe he is a fraud."

In the latter opinion Pink coincided, for she was a perfect reflector of her mistress's manners and views.

Seeing that Vernon did not like him, and with the idea in his mind that the secretary was the accepted lover of Kate Conrad, the Darling of Destiny determined to keep away from Fort Folly as much as he could, though he certainly found great pleasure in his visits there.

All in Gilt Edge City were glad to learn from Ribbon Rob that no more haltings of the coach had occurred, and it was believed that the hanging of the quartet of Road Raiders had frightened them off of the Overland trail.

So security was felt again, and Ribbon Rob began to carry out large sums in gold dust once more.

Travel also "picked up," and seldom it was that the stage went either way without three or more passengers, while sometimes it was crowded.

Ribbon Rob was too honest to keep back a good story, even on himself, and he told about his bringing over a supposed "tenderfoot," to find him the Road Raider lieutenant, and he bore the laugh at his expense with his usual good humor.

"Why, pard," he said, "I had been so clever tuk in by thet Road Raider thet all ther way over ter Gilt Edge, I hed my revolver cocked, and on ther seat, ready fer thet parson ef he sh'd blink his eyes."

"Now, he were all right, as it turned out, but ef he hed not been, I w'd hev dropped on him mighty quick."

"As it are, I am durned glad I fetched him over, for you benighted rascals all need convertin', and he'll pump Gospil inter yer ontill yer run over with goodness."

It was expected that the parson would hold service on the piazza of The Barracks the first Sunday he was there, for it had been so given out; but as he was suffering from a severe cold, and hardly able to speak, he was forced to disappoint the vast assemblage that had come to hear him preach, or "sling Scriptur'," as some of the miners expressed it.

In their disappointment at not receiving consolation, they imbibed ardent spirits until two-thirds of them got wildly drunk, the result of which was that Parson Prim had three fune-

erals on his hands the following morning, and the camps took a holiday to see how he would acquit himself in burying the dead.

He seemed to "pass muster," for nothing was said against him, and from that day scores of men in Gilt Edge held themselves ready for conversion, for Parson Prim had "caught on," it was said.

#### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

##### WHAT BAD LUCK FOUND.

It was on account of Parson Prim's bad cold, and consequently his not being able to preach, as expected, that the Darling of Destiny rode over that Sunday morning to visit Bad Luck in the old miner's cabin.

Had the parson held forth at The Barracks, the Dragoon would have gone there to hear him preach, for he wished to get over his prejudice against the man if he could.

But as there was to be no preaching, the Dragoon rode over to the cabin to see Bad Luck.

That worthy was seated in front of the cabin engaged in making for himself a new wooden leg.

He was just putting the finishing touches on it as the Darling of Destiny rode up.

"Well, Bad Luck, how are you this mornin'?"

The Dragoon dismounted and took a seat on a rustic chair near, a seat made between two trees by the old miner when he built his cabin.

"I'm all right, sir, thanks ter you, fer I were but a poor wretch when you comed to Gilt Edge."

"Do not demean yourself, my friend, for life has not had many pleasures for you, and luck was against you."

"But you are doing well now, and will soon have enough laid up to go East and live your latter days in comfort."

"Yas, Pard Dragoon, thar is them East as has ther same blood in their veins thet I hev, and I wants ter settle near 'em and live out my days."

"Maybe I'll hev enough ter help 'em along a leetle, and then we kin all be happy like; but I owe it to you, sir, fer ef you hed not come ter Gilt Edge City I'd been kilt, or died a pauper and been put inter Rock o' Ages and forgot."

"I owes it to you, sir."

"No, you owe it to yourself, for had you not been a square fellow I would not have taken a fancy to you; and besides, your mine was a paying one, only you had not struck the right lead."

"That's so; but nobody would hev give me what you did fer it, when it didn't pay and then when it did, tuk me in on shares."

"Why, I hes dug more gold out o' it ther past three weeks than I did all ther time afore since I come here."

"Well, how did you find the cabin?"

"It was dirty, sir, and in bad shape; but I put it to rights, and it's neat as a New England kitchen now, as you kin see, sir."

"Do you think those men disturbed the things in it?"

"They looked over everything, that is sart'in, as ef they were a-s'archin' fer sutkin'; but then they kinder tuk all as their own, and let 'em be."

"Was there much in the cabin?"

"It were as snug a leetle home as is in the valley when ther Judge lived here, and he kept things up prime."

"I've tried to git things ter lookin' as he had 'em, and I thinks they does."

"Did you make any discoveries to lead you to believe that the Judge left willingly, or was taken away?"

"Oh, he took his clothing and his weapons, and went willing, or he'd never hev writ thet he did on ther paper he stuck on ther door."

"Thar is what I carved, sir."

The Dragoon saw, neatly carved out, the words which the old miner had written upon the paper.

Stepping into the cabin he looked about him, and, as Bad Luck had said, all was as neat as possible.

There were some sketches hanging upon the walls, executed with a skill that showed no amateur hand, and these were in rustic frames, of leaves, pine burrs and bark.

One of these, larger than the rest, was set in a frame cut into the logs over the fireplace.

This work Bad Luck said he had done, and the frame was most artistically cut in the logs, representing vines and flowers.

"I did thet fer him on Sundays, when I comed over ter see him."

"Yer see it are a pictur' o' his cabin here, and a pretty one, too, and he hed ter make a frame fer it, when I said I would cut him out one."

"Them two logs is big and smooth, as yer see, so I jist got upon ther shelf and carved out thet frame, and thet pictur' fits in perfect, as you sees, sir."

"But then it were very dusty, when I comed here t'other day, and this mornin' I tuk it out ter clean it, and I jist set it back thar, as you sees, thet you might see t'other side."

"And what is on that, Bad Luck?"

"Jist take it down and see, sir."

The Dragoon took out of its socket, or case, the heavy piece of cardboard, which was twenty-four by fifteen inches, and glanced at the other side.

The picture in front was, as I have said, a skillfully-executed sketch of the miner's cabin, and its surroundings, and a very pretty scene it was.

That on the rear seemed to rivet the gaze of the Dragoon, for he stood a long time looking at it.

The work was done with a masterly hand, and each detail had been executed with great care.

It was a view of the head of a wild canyon, and a cliff rising above, and seemingly water-worn on the top.

At the base of the cliff was a cavernous-like opening, and on the rocky sides of the canyon were trees here and there.

Beneath the drawing was written:

"Thank God Mine' in Summer."

Scene in Winter changed by waterfall pouring over cliff."

For a long time did the Dragoon study this sketch, his face wearing a strange expression.

At length he said:

"Bad Luck."

"Sir to you."

"You have made a great discovery."

"Well, pard?"

"This is a sketch of the mine the Judge found, without a doubt."

"Yes, sir."

"You must let this be a secret between us."

"I will, sir."

"And, from this sketch, with it as a guide, we must find the Thank God Mine, and if it is still rich in gold-dust, then we will know that the old Judge did not go East, but was killed."

"If we find others working it, then they are his murderers."

"True, sir, true."

"I will begin the work to-morrow, so I will take this drawing with me," and the Dragoon rode slowly homeward, his head bowed in deep meditation, his lips set in firm determination.

#### CHAPTER XXXIX.

##### THE DRAGOON BEGINS WORK.

HAVING formed the determination to find the "Thank God Mine," which belonged to the mysterious old miner, the Darling of Destiny set forth upon the duty.

He knew that there were hundreds of mines about through the canyons and mountains, and it was known that some miners were growing rich on hidden leads which they kept secret, not caring to tell others.

To go properly to work, the Dragoon began with the mines nearest home, and made a circuit.

He would ride up to where a group of miners were at work, have a pleasant chat with them, take observations of the scenery about them, and then go on his way.

Solitary miners were also visited, as well as those who worked in twos and threes.

Mines that had been deserted were not slighted, and in this way the Dragoon felt that he would visit every point within ten miles of Gilt Edge City.

He had only his remembrance of the sketch to go by, and this he studied each night, until it was indelibly impressed upon his brain.

He had been five days on his hunt, and not once had he come to a scene anything like the one in the sketch.

To let it be thought that he had no secret reason for his visiting the mines, he allowed the miners to think he wanted to purchase certain good leads, and several purchases he did make for himself, and others for Mr. Conrad.

Having had *carte blanche* from Mr. Conrad to purchase any paying mines that could be bought at a low figure, he made what he considered a good bargain in one, and rode up to Fort Folly to let the "Governor" know, for that was the title that had been bestowed upon Mr. Conrad, and it by no means displeased the old gentleman, either, to be so called.

There were other members of the "Governor's" family that had not escaped the border nomenclature, for Kate had received the name of "Lady Gold Dust," on account of her sweet ways and the golden hue of her hair, while the secretary, who was not liked by the miners particularly, went under the appellation of "Lord Tenderfoot."

Though Kate and her father were pleased with their names, the same cannot be said for Sylvester Vernon, as he knew that tenderfoot was synonymous with greenhorn.

The parson also had not escaped, for he had been dubbed Bible Banger, though no disrespect was meant thereby, those who named him doubtless having in mind certain parsonsthey had listened to in their younger days, who had pounded the Scriptures by way of making their discourse more emphatic.

After this digression regarding the nomenclature of Gilt Edge City, I will proceed to relate how the Dragoon went to Fort Folly to make known his purchase to the Governor.

It was nearly sunset, and a rain-storm was



threatening to come on with the night; but the dark clouds rolling up over the mountains added that much more to the beauty of the scene, which the Dragoon enjoyed as he rode along.

Reaching Fort Folly he saw the Governor, his wife and Sylvester Vernon seated out upon the piazza, also enjoying the scene.

"Glad to see you, captain, so dismount and join us."

"You have been a great stranger of late," cried the Governor, as the Dragoon rode up.

Hitching his horse, he joined the party on the piazza, Mrs. Conrad welcoming him pleasantly, while the manner of Vernon was constrained.

"I bought you a mine to-day, Governor, and it is a good one, so I rode by to tell you of it," said the Dragoon.

"I am very much obliged to you, captain, for not a mine of your selection for me have I that does not pay handsomely."

"I will go there with you to-morrow and arrange matters."

"Then I will come by after breakfast, sir."

"Is it far?" asked Mrs. Conrad.

"About six miles, and up at the head of the valley."

"It will be a pleasant ride there and back; but can a vehicle go there?"

"Yes, madam, for the trail is a good one."

"Then, husband, you can drive me in the spring-wagon, and Sylvester can ride with Captain Gaston and Kate on horseback."

Thus it was arranged, and the Dragoon arose to go, when Mrs. Conrad said:

"Stay to supper, captain, for we will be most happy to have you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Conrad, but I have been in the saddle all day and am considerably travel-stained, while it will also rain within the hour."

"Yes, and that storm makes me anxious about Kate, for she should be back by this time."

"She is not away alone, I hope?" said the Dragoon, quickly.

"Oh no, she went with Parson Prim, who was anxious to have her ride over and see the new site he had chosen for his church," said Mrs. Conrad.

The Dragoon raised his field-glass to his eyes, for he always carried it with him, and swept the camps from one end to the other.

"I do not see them, and unless they return soon they will get a ducking," he said.

"You will not stay, Gaston?" said the Governor.

"No, thank you, sir, but I will be on hand in the morning."

"Good-night," and raising his hat he strode away to his horse, and mounting rode home at a rapid canter, arriving there just as the big drops of rain began to fall.

#### CHAPTER XL.

##### A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

THE Darling of Destiny was seated in his comfortable cabin, engaged in studying the sketch of the Thank God Mine.

The supper had been cleared away by Hannibal, who was seated on one side of the table, reading a book.

Without, a fearful storm was raging, and the winds howled about the cabin in a most savage way, while the rain beat in torrents upon the roof.

"Hannibal, I am more and more convinced that I will find this mine," said the Dragoon, at length.

"I believe that you will, sir, for you cannot help it, if you go over the land as you are within ten miles of Gilt Edge City."

"The question is, will I find it being worked by others, or just as it was left by its owner?"

"If there are miners working it, sir, they are the ones who should give an account of its former owner and how they got possession of his property."

"So I think, Hannibal— But hark! there are hoof-falls without."

Both listened, and then came a loud hail:

"Hello! hello!"

The Dragoon stepped to a secret slide in the wall, and called out:

"Well, what is it?"

"Ah, Gaston, that is you. I am Conrad."

"Dismount at once, Mr. Conrad, and come in," and the Dragoon stepped away from the slide, while Hannibal threw open the door opening upon the piazza.

In an instant the Governor entered, enveloped in a storm-coat.

His face was very pale, and the Dragoon saw at once that something had happened, so he said:

"My dear sir, what evil has occurred to bring you out in such a storm?"

The Governor sunk down into a chair, and groaned:

"My child!"

"What has befallen her?" and the voice of the Dragoon was deep and stern.

"She went off with that parson, and she has not returned."

"Ha! can this be so?"

"Yes."

"They may have stopped in some cabin to avoid the storm."

"Kate would ride through fire, knowing our anxiety about her, rather than do such a thing."

"No, she would come if she drowned the parson on the way."

"Then what do you expect as the cause of her absence?"

"One of my miners came to the house to tell me he had struck a rich lead in that mine you made that assassin Darby sell to me, and he says he saw them going out the Eagle Cliff road, Kate, the parson and two or three other horsemen."

"Indeed! what could have taken them that trail, and who were the two horsemen?"

"That I do not know, and that is why I came to you."

"Mrs. Conrad is almost frantic, and in our distress I said I would come at once to you."

"Hannibal, get my horse, Trailer."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want my storm-suit, too."

"Yes, sir."

"How long ago was it that the miner saw them?"

"Two hours ago."

"That was about sunset?"

"Just about."

"Did he say where on the Eagle Cliff road?"

"Yes, near the creek crossing."

"There are five trails that run off from that point, and those five diverge into a score."

"I will carry a lantern and see if we can find tracks, but this storm is against us."

"I will, while you are getting ready, go back and see if she has returned."

"No, Mr. Conrad, I will send a man."

Taking his bugle down from where it hung, the Dragoon stepped to the door and blew a peculiar call.

This he repeated after half a minute, and it was answered by a long, ringing shout.

"I will have a man here in a few minutes, sir," he said, and soon there rode up to the piazza a young miner, who sprung from his horse and entered the cabin.

"Well, captain, something is up, to get your call a night like this, but here I am," he said, pleasantly.

He was a young man, with a well-knit form, piercing eye and heavily bearded face.

Like most of the miners in Gilt Edge City, he wore his hair long.

He was enveloped in a storm-suit and looked ready for business.

"Murdock, the Governor's daughter rode off this afternoon with that infernal parson, and has not returned."

"They were seen going out the Eagle Cliff road, with two horsemen."

"I am going to the brook crossing, to see if I can catch their trail there, and I wish you to ride to the Governor's and see if they have gotten back."

"Whether they have or not come after me and let me know."

"Yes, sir," and the young miner was off like a flash.

"Now, Governor, I am ready, for here comes my horse."

Dressed in his storm-suit the Dragoon mounted, and the Governor doing the same they rode away in the driving storm, going at a canter.

Each carried a dark-lantern under his cloak, and after a ride of half an hour they came to the brook that crossed the Eagle Cliff trail.

It was now swollen to a torrent, and the Dragoon said:

"Governor, you do not know your horse as I do mine, and I would not advise you to attempt to swim him across."

"The trails I seek are on the hill a few hundred feet beyond, and I will go there and make search, and you remain here in the shelter of these pines."

"If Murdock comes by hail him and tell him to also wait, for this stream is no easy water to cross unless one knows the animal he rides."

"Then do not you attempt it, captain."

"Trailer will make it, sir, without the least trouble," and the Dragoon rode boldly into the torrent.

Trailer seemed to understand just what was expected of him, and he breasted the waves splendidly and carried his master in safety across.

Arriving at the place where the five trails branched off, the Dragoon dismounted, and leaving his horse standing unhitched, began to search the ground.

The rain had washed the tracks out, but in a little pool of water, in the trail turning off to the right, the Dragoon found a glove.

"Ah!"

This was all he said as he picked it up, looked at it an instant and thrust it into his pocket.

Calling to Trailer to follow him, he went along the trail, lighting his way with the lantern, and occasionally stopping and examining the ground carefully.

At length he came to a ridge, and on it the earth was soft.

There was a heavy growth of pines on top, and these had kept off the driving rain, while there had been no wash.

Here were a number of tracks, and the Dragoon set himself to work to study them out as he would a puzzle.

After quite a long while thus spent, he moved on, Trailer following closely, and soon came to an indistinct trail turning off up the mountains.

He had gone but a few steps on this when something white caught his eye.

It was a handkerchief. This went into the pocket with the glove.

Then there were other tracks seen that had not been washed out, and after examining them closely the Dragoon said:

"Well, Trailer, we will go back."

Mounting, he rode back at a canter, plunged into the stream, and swimming across was joined by the Governor and Murdock.

"The lady had not returned, captain," said the young man.

"I know it; she has been kidnapped," was the Dragoon's response.

#### CHAPTER XLI.

##### THE DRAGOON'S VOW.

THE words of the Darling of Destiny were a severe blow to the Governor, for he groaned in anguish and murmured:

"My poor child! my poor wife!"

"My dear Governor, do not take it so to heart, for all will come well."

"For God's sake, go with me, Gaston, and tell her mother so."

"Certainly, sir, if you wish it."

At a brisk pace they rode back to Gilt Edge City and thence to Fort Folly, the Dragoon telling Murdock to go to his cabin and await his return.

As they rode up to the door Mrs. Conrad thought that her daughter had returned, and uttered a glad cry.

But she shrunk back in bitter disappointment as she saw only her husband and the Dragoon.

"Oh, sir, tell me where is my child, for you seem to know everything," cried the sorrowing mother.

"My dear, be calm, for the captain has come at my request to tell you all," said the Governor.

She sunk back in her chair, and Sylvester Vernon, who was there, said eagerly:

"Then you have news of her?"

"I went to the home of the captain, as you know, and he at once took the trail, I going with him, and what he discovered he did not tell me, as we could not talk in that driving rain and wind."

"I begged him to come home and tell you, wife, all he had found out, and his words gave me hope."

"Oh, sir! save my child, and I will never forget you in my prayers."

"My dear Mrs. Conrad, I went on the trail, where the miner told your husband he had seen Miss Conrad, with the parson and two other men."

"I crossed the brook, for five trails diverge on the other side, and—"

"Yes, and he would not allow me, or the young miner, Murdock, to cross, so fearfully swollen was the stream."

"I found on the trail branching to the right your daughter's glove," and he handed out the little buckskin gauntlet.

Seizing it, the mother cried:

"Yes, it is Kate's, and this proves that she went that way."

"It proves more, madam, for it was dropped as a guide to whom might follow."

"Ah, and you think she did it on purpose?"

"I know it."

"And then, sir?"

"I went along the trail on foot, my horse following, and I searched it thoroughly with my bull's-eye lantern."

"Coming to a ridge, that was protected by pines, and had not washed, I found a number of tracks."

"A halt had been made here when the rain began; but they did not stay long."

"You could tell this?"

"Yes, for the hoofs had trampled the earth but little, which proved a short stop."

"Here I found four horses had been."

"Then the miner was right?"

"Yes, Governor, and I recognized the hoof-tracks of Miss Conrad's horse, and also of the animal ridden by the parson, for I took occasion of late, for a certain reason, to get a model of the hoofs of his horse."

They looked at the Dragoon in surprise, while Sylvester Vernon demanded, almost rudely:

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I doubted him."

"You once expressed yourself against him, I remember."

"Yes, I never liked Parson Prim."

"But pray tell me more," cried Mrs. Conrad, who felt that perhaps after all the Dragoon had been right.

"I recognized the tracks of the horses ridden by Miss Conrad and the parson."

"Then I took a trail leading to the right, and up into the Wild Mountains, for I had a guide there in the shape of this handkerchief."



He handed the little wet kerchief to the mother, and there in one corner was embroidered the name:

"KATE."

"And you think that she dropped this, too, Gaston?"

"I know it, Governor, and it, and the glove, tell me that she was a captive, being carried off."

"And the parson?"

"May be a captive with her."

"But the motive of her captors?"

"Gold."

"Ransom?"

"Yes, sir, for they think you will pay enormously for her return."

"I will give every dollar I own to get her back, and begin life over again."

"There is no need of that, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Will you trust me to find Miss Conrad?"

"Gladly!" cried both the Governor and his wife.

"Then I will do so."

"You seem most confident, sir," and Vernon said it almost with a sneer.

"I am so confident, Mr. Vernon, that I here vow to restore Miss Conrad to her mother, without the expenditure of a dollar in ransom, and more, if her captors have treated her unkindly I vow that each and every one of them shall hang for it, for I saw other evidence that convinced me there were others in waiting, and the tracks of six horses led from where I turned back on the trail into the mountains."

"Mrs. Conrad, at dawn I will begin my work."

"Good-night," and the Dragoon departed, declining the urgent invitation from the Governor and his wife to remain all night.

#### CHAPTER XLII.

##### A COUNCIL OF WAR.

MATT MURDOCK was one of the most reckless young miners in Gilt Edge City.

He was not given to dissipation, but he worked hard all the week and when Saturday night came was wont to lose all he had made in a game of cards.

Not a bad fellow was he, and yet he was a dangerous man to fool with.

He had killed his man, and did it in a square, stand-up fight.

He had a mine that paid him fairly, and yet he could save nothing for a rainy day, and often said that he expected to die as poor as he was born.

Attracting the attention of the Dragoon one night when he was gambling, Champ had been asked regarding him, and what he said was strongly in his favor.

The Dragoon watched him gambling for awhile, and then heard him say:

"I'm about broke; but if I had the money to bluff you on your hand I believe I would win, and I'd go high."

"How high, sir?" asked the Dragoon.

"Five hundred, if I had it, for I feel I've got a good hand."

"I'll lend it to you," was the response, and it was thrown upon the table.

"I thank you, pard, but I might lose, and it would take a year to pay you back."

"I'll risk it."

"Done."

The bluff was made and Matt Murdock won. That night he rode home with the Dragoon for company, for his cabin was the nearest one to the Darling of Destiny's.

"Murdock, I like you, and I wish to serve you."

"What would you want for your mine?"

"Call it fifteen hundred, captain."

"I'll take it, and you continue to work it for me on wages; but do not let any one know I bought it of you, and more, though we are to be friends, no one must know it."

"I'm your man, captain, and I thank you."

"Do you know Tempest?"

"I do, sir, and a hard nut he is, too."

"Are you friendly with him?"

"Not friendly or unfriendly, sir."

"Cultivate him then."

"He is a great borrower of dust, I hear, so lend him some and charge the loan to me."

"You know he is a devil, so let him think you are, too."

"You are plotting something, captain?"

"Yes, and you will know what in good time."

"Count on me, sir," was the reply, and from that day Matt Murdock and the Dragoon were secretly pards.

Upon returning to his cabin from Fort Folly, the Dragoon found Matt Murdock there talking to Hannibal.

He threw off his storm-suit, but having swam the brook, was very wet, so Hannibal soon rigged him out in dry clothes and slippers, for the Darling of Destiny loved to take his ease.

"Murdock?"

"Well, captain?"

"We will discuss this supper Hannibal has for us, and then we'll have a business talk."

"All right, captain."

The supper was disposed of, and with a relish, and then the Dragoon said:

"You and Tempest seem as thick as thieves of late."

"We are, and he's a great one."

"The parson seemed to take kindly to him."

"Yes, the parson said he was so very wicked he would need special prayers, so he began on him at once."

"They seemed to have a good many prayers together."

"Captain, my idea is that the parson was a fraud."

"He and Tempest seemed to understand each other."

"Yes, they did, and they had many a confab together; but Tempest is a little shy of me, and didn't tell me all he knew, I am sure."

"Murdock, I believe you to be a very brave man."

"I am not easily frightened, captain."

"Are you willing to take a big risk to do good?"

"Yes, sir, I am willing to do as you say."

"Well, Murdock, we will hold a council of war."

"I am ready, sir."

"Are you willing to take abuse, when you know it is not meant?"

"Yes, sir."

"I think, Murdock, that Miss Conrad has been kidnapped by Road Raiders."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes."

"You suspect the parson?"

"He may have been a tool of the Road Raiders, and may be innocent, and captured with her, for these mountain scamps know that the miners would pay a good ransom to get back their parson."

"They would indeed."

"Then Captain Brass knows that the Governor would give a small fortune to get his daughter back."

"That is so, captain."

"The Road Raiders have been hit so hard of late that they have kept quiet, and this may be a master-stroke to get enough to retire on, and give up the road."

"I believe you are right, sir."

"Now no one knows where their retreat is, unless it is Tempest, and somehow I believe that he does."

"Yes."

"If Miss Conrad and the parson have been taken by the Road Raiders, they have been taken to their mountain den."

"To attack it with a hundred miners, as we might do, would perhaps cause Captain Brass to threaten his prisoners, and thus defeat our aims, so I wish you to go to their camp, learn its approaches, workings and all, and let me into the secret."

"How can I go, sir?"

"I am sure that Flush Fred, Darby and Bruiser Bill joined them, for I trailed the two last into the mountains where I left the trail to-night."

"You did, sir?"

"Yes, and there is where they have gone, and I wish you to go, too."

"But how can I get there?"

"As I said, I think Tempest knows the way, and I'll see that you both leave Gilt Edge City to-morrow," and the Dragoon smiled significantly, which caused the young miner to understand that he meant to play some deep game in which he and Tempest were to be participants.

#### CHAPTER XLIII.

##### PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

IN spite of the storm that was still raging, Matt Murdock left the cabin of the Dragoon and returned to his own.

Putting his horse up in the shanty that served as a stable, he made his way on foot to the cabin of Tempest, who dwelt not far from him.

All was dark, and his knocking failed to arouse any one.

Then he went to the stable in the rear of the cabin.

It was locked, but by chirping and calls, the young miner discovered that there was no horse within.

"He went away this morning, and he has not been back since."

"He is not at The Barracks, so where is he?"

So saying the miner returned to his cabin.

It was after midnight, and throwing off his storm-suit, he built a fire, and leaving his things to dry laid down to rest.

At the break of dawn he was up, had his breakfast and then strolled over to Tempest's cabin.

He was just opening his door, and called out:

"Ho, pard, it were a bad storm we had last night; but it have cleared off now."

"Yes, it was a bad storm; but where were you last night, Tempest?"

"Asleep in my cabin, whar every man sh'd be on sich a night."

"I knocked at your door as I came home, but couldn't get an answer."

"I was that weary I didn't tarn over all night."

"Did you hear the news, Tempest?"

"What were that?"

"The parson has run off with the Lady Gold Dust."

"No!"

"It is a fact, or they have been taken in by Road Raiders."

"I want ter know."

"They went riding yesterday afternoon, and they have not been seen since."

"Maybe they stopped out of ther storm somewhere."

"No, she wouldn't do that; but the storm has washed out every trace of their trail."

"Waal, waal."

"Pard?"

"Yas."

"I wish we had thought of that little scheme."

"What's thet?"

"Why, we could have made a fortune by it."

"By what?"

"Just capturing the Lady Gold Dust and the parson, for her father would pay big for her return, and the miners would chip in lively for the parson."

"That's so."

"I wish we had only thought of it."

"You wouldn't hev did it."

"Why not?"

"Yer lacks ther sand."

"I only wish I had had the chance."

"Waal, it would have been a big thing."

"Now it would, and I guess it would pay big."

"Better than digging for gold."

"Yes, indeed."

"Waal, others hev got ter git ther dust fer ther return of the leddy."

"Tempest?"

"Yes, Matt."

"Why could we not recapture her?"

"What?"

"Why could we not bring her back and get the reward?"

"C'u'd it be done?"

"I think so."

"How?"

"Well, we could find out just what reward the Governor would give, and how much more the boys would chip in for the parson."

"If it amounted to ten thousand each of us, we might find some way to recapture them."

"If we knew whar they is."

"Pard, you know as well as I do, that there is but one person who would kidnap her."

"Who are that?"

"Captain Brass."

"You think he did it?"

"I'm sure he did."

"What makes you sure?"

"Well, no one else would do it."

"Then if he has her it's no use."

"You are wrong there."

"How so?"

"Well, we might find the mountain retreat, watch our chance, and help them out."

Tempest shook his head.

"Well, I know a better plan."

"What are it?"

"Let us join the band."

"Would you tarn outlaw?"

"There seems to be more money in it than in gold-digging."

"Yes, thar is."

"We could hunt them up, say we were driven out of Gilt Edge City, and get to be members."

"Captain Brass wishes to get a large force, I know, and they would be glad to get us."

"Then we could watch our chance, free the two prisoners, and escape."

"Bringing them back to Gilt Edge, we could get the reward, and with that much money we could go where we please."

"Will you do this, pard?"

"I will, Tempest."

"Put your hand thar, pard."

The young miner grasped the hand of the burly ruffian.

"Now, Pard Matt, I'm in this leetle game with yer, for I see your way makes us rich, while my way only gits me a few hundred."

"I knows whar them two is, ther parson and Lady Gold Dust, and you jist hunt around and find out how much will be paid for their return, and you and me will fetch 'em, though we'll hev ter make ourselves lonesome in these parts, as Cap'n Brass hain't no man ter play it on."

"It's a bargain, and I'll know all by night and meet you at The Barracks at eight o'clock."

"Waal, I'll go to my mine now, and be at Ther Barracks on time, you bet."

Thus they parted, and a smile of triumph rested upon the face of Matt Murdock as he walked rapidly back toward the cabin.

#### CHAPTER XLIV.

##### THE DRAGOON ON THE TRAIL.

IT was just dawn when the Darling of Destiny arose and began to dress for the work before him.

Hannibal was up betimes and soon had breakfast ready, and then the cabin was locked up and the two started off on horseback.

The Dragoon took Hannibal with him, well knowing his great skill as a trailer, and also how valuable his advice was.

Going to the cabin of Bad Luck, the Dragoon



gave him the key of his stable and asked him to go up and feed and water the horses, if they were not back by nightfall.

"There is a trail here, Bad Luck."

"Did you see who went along?"

"No, cap'n, he passed in the night, but I heard him swearin' at his horse, and it struck me it were thet limb o' Satan they calls Tempest."

"I see; well, we may be back at noon, and perhaps not," and the Dragoon and Hannibal rode on.

The trail was taken which had been followed the night before, and the brook had run down so rapidly that it was crossed without the horses swimming.

Taking the trail to the right they came to the fresh tracks on the ridge, and a comparison with the drawing which the Dragoon had made of size and peculiarities of the tracks leading by the cabin of Bad Luck, showed that the same horse that had been along there was with the party whose trail they were then following.

"If Tempest was one of the two men the miner saw with the parson and Miss Conrad, who was the other, Hannibal?"

"It is hard to tell, sir; but those two men were the ones who captured the Lady Gold Dust and the parson, though just where we cannot tell, as their tracks are washed out."

"You are right, Hannibal, without doubt."

"Those two men captured them, and coming here were joined by others."

"It was a well-arranged plot; but now to follow on as far as we can, and we will know where they were taken."

A ride of a mile along the trail and Hannibal dismounted and picked up a red plume, beaten into the ground by the rain.

It lay just beyond where a trail branched off from the one they were following.

"That brave girl gives us a guide whenever they strike a new trail, for she knows the rain will wash out their tracks."

"And I guess she heard the men talking about the trails, sir, for it must have been so dark they had to search for them in the storm."

"Doubtless."

Once more they rode on, and after a couple of miles came to where a halt had evidently been made.

Here were numerous tracks, showing that fully a dozen horses had remained there in waiting for some time.

"What do you make out of this, Hannibal?"

"It looks, sir, as though the first two captured the prisoners, and were to fly to where the other two horsemen waited on the ridge, and these were to cover their retreat, if pursued."

"Then, if pressed hard, they were to come on here, where a large force could keep pursuers at bay."

"You see this is a good place for a stand, sir."

"Hannibal, your head is serenely level, for you have called the turn on their little plan."

"When the others came up they all went on together, turning off here to the right, as you see."

"Yes, sir, and here is the Lady Gold Dust's whip," and Hannibal sprung down and picked it up out of the mud.

"Hannibal!"

"Yes, sir."

"The Lady Gold Dust, as the miners call Miss Conrad, is in the retreat of Captain Brass, and she has been captured by the aid of some one in Gilt Edge City."

"That is certain, sir."

"We can do nothing ourselves, and we have found out all we need know, so we will return and find out if the trail leading by Bad Luck's cabin, and coming up here, is that of Tempest's horse."

"Yes, sir, and if it is, then you can make him tell all."

"I think so; but perhaps that good fellow, Murdock, has found out something also."

So saying, and armed with the plume and whip of the kidnapped girl, the Dragoon turned his horse homeward, and Hannibal rode close by his side, the two talking over the best plan of action.

Upon returning to the trail, that had been made before dawn, the Dragoon followed it directly to the stable of the miner Tempest.

This settled the question as to Tempest's part in the kidnapping.

His cabin was locked, but his horse, as seen through the cracks in the logs, looked gaunt and tired, while the saddle and bridle were wet.

Returning home the Dragoon found on the floor, slipped under the door, a piece of paper upon which was written:

"Tempest was all right."

"Returned just before dawn."

"I have arranged plot with him to say we were driven out of Gilt Edge City and join Road Raiders."

"Then to aid prisoners to escape and claim reward."

"He has gone to his mine, and I am supposed to be finding out just what reward miners will give for parson, and the Governor will pay for Lady Gold Dust."

"We meet at nine to-night at Barracks, and, if under any pretense you can drive us out of the camps, the better it will look for us."

"I am confident Tempest is a Road Raider, or the agent at least of Captain Brass in Gilt Edge, and his excuse for going to him with me will be that he could not remain here."

"I will see that Tempest does not attempt to use a firearm, so as to force you to kill him, for he knows the way to the secret retreat I am sure."

"To-night at nine at Barracks. MATT."

This letter pleased the Dragoon greatly, and he rode at once over to Fort Folly, where he told the grieving parents that he hoped soon to bring them good news.

Of course Gilt Edge City was greatly excited over the disappearance of the new parson, and the Lady Gold Dust, but it had been set afloat as a rumor, that the two had attempted to cross the swollen brook, on their return, and had been swept away to death, so that no foul play was suspected, except by a few wise heads, who felt sure that something was wrong in that mysterious disappearance.

#### CHAPTER XLV.

##### AT THE BARRACKS.

THE miner Tempest arrived early at The Barracks.

In fact he went to his cabin before sunset and changed his toiling-suit for his best.

Then he went up to The Barracks and treated himself to a hotel supper with a bottle of wine, something new for Tempest to do, as he was known to be stingy and wine was twenty dollars a bottle.

But somehow Tempest was flush with funds and that evening wanted the best and plenty of it.

Of course the main topic of conversation around The Barracks was the disappearance of the Lady Gold Dust and Parson Prim.

A search had been suggested by many, but it was said that the torrent, such as the brook had been the night before, would have swept the bodies scores of miles away.

Those who suggested foul play were laughed at, and an offer to have all Gilt Edge City turn out and hunt for the missing ones was not, for some reason, encouraged.

When the Road Raiders were hinted at as the captors of the couple, it was said that Captain Brass and his men had decamped from the mountains, alarmed by the fate of the four men of the band who had been hanged.

And so the talk went.

After his supper Tempest felt good, and it struck him that it would be a good thing to play cards, if he could find some one whom he could cheat without being caught.

Now, Tempest was considered an expert card-player, and he almost always won; but there were many who hinted that he cheated, though he could not be caught at it.

If he played a game where he did not win, he would soon draw out; but as long as he was winning he would play.

You might kill a man and not have right on your side, in Gilt Edge City, but to cheat at cards, usurp another's mine, lay claim to a lead that did not belong to you, or to steal a horse, or weapons, were offenses that could not be overlooked, and were not.

Sometimes the offender was instantly exalted in the world, as an example to others, but a rope was the motive power.

So if Tempest cheated he played sly, and gambled only with those who could not detect him, for he had never been caught in the act.

As he was a desperado of the worst type, and always played with his "gun" on the table by his side, few cared to arouse him by a suggestion that all was not square.

He had been known to kill men over the table, and then to call another to take his vacant chair and play with his cards, often stained with the life-blood of the unfortunate.

So Tempest was, in border parlance, a terror, and it was his pleasure to terrorize.

Observing his intimacy with the parson, some had hopes of his reformation, though a few "doubting Thomases" were fearful that he would get Zekiel Prim into card-playing and make of him a fighting preacher.

In looking about for victims, the eyes of Tempest fell upon a person who had just ridden up to The Barracks a few moments before.

It was the Darling of Destiny.

Now, Tempest was a reasoner, and he said to himself:

"Now Destiny does lead thet feller ter luck all ther time."

"He shoots ter kill, he escapes bullets, makes mines thet are down ter bed-rock pan out big, and jist has things his own way."

"Now there are exceptions to all rules, and he's got somethin' as will tarn ag'in' him, and, as he never plays keards, I believes he's afeerd ter."

"I hes never see him play, and some say he is afeerd he will lose his luck."

"So I'll tackle him fer a game, and if he are a winner I'll draw out durned quick."

With this resolution, Tempest walked up to the Dragoon, as he stood talking with Landlord Champ, and said:

"Pard Dragoon, how are yer?"

"Well, thank you, and you?"

"I am dull as a old shovel, pard, ter-night, and am lookin' for a leetle game o' keards, so I thought I would make bold to tackle you."

"Well, Tempest, I seldom play cards, except for amusement."

"I only plays fer dust, and I wants yer ter play with me, ef yer hain't too stuck up ter play with a ordinary man."

"Oh, no, I am willing to play if we can make it a four-handed game."

Tempest had won many a dollar from Landlord Champ.

Shrewd as he was the landlord could not play cards well, and so he had given up gambling.

So Tempest said:

"Waal, there's yer bosom fr'end, ther land-lord."

Landlord Champ was about to refuse, and also to tell the Dragoon boldly to have nothing to do with Tempest, when he caught the eye of the soldier.

There was a look in it that he read aright, and that was to accept, so he replied:

"If you feel like playing, captain, I'll take a hand as your partner, but I am a poor player, and it is only to please you."

"Well, I do not care to play, but our friend Tempest here asks it, and if he will get a partner, we will play a few games with them."

Tempest looked around, and seated in the saloon, having lately entered, he spied Matt Murdock.

"Thar's my pard, Matt Murdock, and he will j'ine us."

"I don't think much of him, but I guess he'll be a good partner for you, Mr. Tempest, so get a table and let us begin."

Tempest did not see the sarcasm in the remark of the Dragoon, and turned away to speak to Matt Murdock.

"Pard, I has got ther Dragoon ter play a game o' keards with me, and his partner is ter be Landlord Champ, who ain't no good."

"I wants you, and jist back me up and I'll win yer lots o' money, but don't go headstrong yer own way, as you has no luck, yer know."

"All right, Tempest, I am willing; but can't the Dragoon play a good game?"

"Thar must be suthin' he can't do, and thar's nothin' else I kin think of jist now thet he don't do prime."

"All right, we'll beat 'em, for you always win," cried Matt, knowing that the Dragoon had some deep motive in playing with the desperado.

In the mean time Champ had said quickly, as Tempest turned away:

"Why, captain, that is the worst fellow you could have picked up in Gilt Edge City to play with."

"That is why I wish to play with him; but, Champ, do just as I wish in this, and don't you be surprised at anything you see."

"If I cover Tempest, you level at Murdock, if you see need of it, but for God's sake don't draw trigger on him, or kill Tempest either."

"Leave the latter to me."

"I thought you and Matt were friends, and—"

"We are, only Tempest don't know it, and I have not time now to tell you what I intended to do; but you back me up, no matter who appears to suffer."

"I'll do it."

"Gents, we is ready," called out Tempest in a loud voice, and the Dragoon and Landlord Champ walked over and joined the desperado and Matt Murdock.

#### CHAPTER XLVI.

##### A GAME OF CARDS.

THE table which Tempest had selected for the game of cards was one of the most conspicuous in the saloon.

He seemed anxious that all should know that he was playing cards with the Darling of Destiny and the landlord.

Until of late, since his close association with Tempest, Matt Murdock had been looked upon by the better class of miners as a very square fellow.

But caught in bad company, the opinion regarding him was changing.

Comment was made, however, that Tempest had in some way struck better company than was his wont.

The fact that the landlord was playing again created a sensation, for it was known that Champ had given up card-playing long before.

That the Dragoon should play caused also excitement.

He had never been seen to take a drink at the bar, and he had always refused a game of cards when urged by different miners to play.

So all were interested, and other games suffered from curiosity to witness the playing of the quartette.

With prophetic souls that had had much basis for prophecy in the past, a number predicted a row before the game should end.

"Nobody kin play with thet devil Tempest," whispered one.

"He cheats," said another.

"He'd steal."



"Oh, but he's a tough."

"He better keep a civil tongue in his head this night."

"You're preachin', pard, fer thet Dragoon hain't asleep."

"If he plays any sharp tricks he'll tune up thet soldier's revolver."

"I'm ashamed o' Matt Murdock."

"He's gone ter ruin, sure, since he's been runnin' with Tempest."

"Waal, we'll see whose toes is turned up."

Such were the remarks upon all sides, yet delivered *sotto voce*, for the speakers were not anxious to "rub the tiger ag'in' the fur," as one expressed it, by letting Tempest hear what was said.

The Dragoon began to play in the same free-and-easy way in which he did everything.

Tempest had dealt, and the game was with his pack of cards.

Around the table was the crowd, ten deep.

The first bluff was won by the Dragoon, who, when Tempest, according to his custom, placed his revolver on the table, simply said:

"You are playing with gentlemen, Mr. Tempest, so return that weapon to your belt."

"I allus plays with it right thar, ready for use."

"You will not do so this time, for it is time enough to draw it when it is needed."

The applause that followed this remark caused Tempest to feel that he was worsted, so he said:

"I'll put it up, fer I doesn't think either you or ther landlord would cheat; but ef I has ter use it, I'll do it."

"My dear sir, no one will hinder you, unless some one draws quicker, and you have the reputation of being lightning on the draw."

"I is, too."

"I do not doubt it; but this is a friendly game of cards between gentlemen—I speak now of Landlord Champ and myself—and cheating is not expected to enter it."

Tempest understood this, for the laugh that went round showed that the sarcasm was detected very quickly, and he scowled and replied:

"You don't include me and Matt as gents, then?"

"I don't know you two, so you will have to speak for yourselves."

"Waal, we is gents."

"Prove it then by playing an honest game of cards."

The miners wondered, for Tempest was not wont to be bullied by any one; but there was something in the quiet manner of the Dragoon that seemed to cow him.

"Come, let us play and quit talk."

"You lead, Tempest," said Matt.

The game was then begun, the landlord playing watchfully, Tempest slowly and with apparent thought, Matt in his off-hand, usual manner, and the Dragoon with apparent indifference as to whether he lost or won.

He smoked a cigar the while, and yet he seemed cognizant of all that was going on.

The first game and the second were won by the Dragoon and the landlord, and the amount was two hundred on each game, for Tempest had set the sum.

The third game Tempest and Matt won, the fourth went back to the other side, and from the fifth on the Dragoon and the landlord lost steadily.

"Gentlemen, join me in a glass of wine," said the Dragoon, to those playing with him, and turning to the crowd he continued:

"Step up, gentlemen, and call for what you wish."

Brindle brought the wine, and he passed around the table pouring it out in the four glasses, which the reader must understand were by no means delicate ware, but heavy tumblers, though the wine was champagne at twenty dollars a bottle.

As Brindle came in between the Dragoon and Tempest to fill the latter's glass, when he stepped back a transformation scene had taken place, for, by a quick movement, the Darling of Destiny suddenly covered the desperado with a revolver in his right hand and Matt Murdock with one in his left.

He seemed to be glancing along both barrels, too, by some strange movements of his eyes, which gave him the power of looking in two directions at the same time, and what he said caused a hush to fall upon all present and sent a chill to one heart.

"Tempest, you and Murdock are infamous cheats, and if you move an inch I will kill you both."

There was no mistaking these words, and Tempest was as pallid as death, while Matt Murdock's face flushed crimson.

Tempest had one hand grasping his glass, his other was holding the cards he was about to shuffle.

To attempt to get his hand down to his hip on a weapon meant instant death, and he knew it.

"Landlord, take those cards, please, which Tempest has just placed beneath the pack."

"He has the highest cards there, to deal to himself and Murdock from beneath, while to us he deals from the top."

"It is a clever sleight-of-hand trick, and he keeps his spare cards in his sleeve."

"It's a lie!" yelled the desperado.

"I never cheated!" cried Murdock.

"You are the liar, Tempest, as I will prove, and your partner played the cards you gave him and knew your little game to win."

The cards proved to have been "fixed" just as the Dragoon said, and spare ones were found in the desperado's sleeve.

"Now, my precious pair, this money belongs to Landlord Champ and myself, and as cheats are not allowed to dwell in Gilt Edge City, if they are known, I will give you until dawn to get out of these camps."

"If you are within the limits of Gilt Edge City when the sun rises, I will lead a party to hang you on the Gallows Tree."

"Hang 'em now!" shouted a voice.

"Yes, string 'em up!"

"No, gentlemen, I have given them their lives on condition, and told them their doom if they disregard it, and I will not only not go back on my word, but I will protect them against all odds, for I, not you, am the one cheated."

"Bully for the Dragoon! he's a darlin'," cried one, and the crowd sided with him.

"Go!"

The word was stern, and the two men obeyed with alacrity, the look that passed between Matt Murdock and the Dragoon showing that they understood each other, though the young miner had been forced to place himself in a most awkward situation.

As for Tempest, he had met his match, and he was glad to get out from under that dread eye.

Once out of The Barracks, followed by the jeers of the crowd, Tempest said:

"Now, pard, we'll git fer ther Road Raiders' retreat, and when we gits ther captives, we'll be solid ag'in."

By midnight the two men had turned their backs on Gilt Edge City and were riding rapidly along the mountain trail.

#### CHAPTER XLVII.

##### THE CAPTURE.

I WILL now return to the ride taken by Kate Conrad and Parson Prim.

The parson was always selecting "church sites," and had found a new one, "the very place of all."

He wished Kate to ride there with him and give her opinion of it.

Kate Conrad did not like the man, nor did she dislike him.

He was clever enough, but she seemed to feel that he was more clever than he showed.

He was young, too, though his glasses gave him a settled look, and his serious face added to it.

The parson was not an awkward rider, and he tried to be entertaining.

Kate did not want to go with him, but her mother requested it, for Mrs. Conrad had been quite won over by the parson, and so she went.

The site chosen for the church was a good one, and Kate was pleased with it; but the parson wished her to see others, and then he had a cabin to show of a fancy kind, which would make a pretty model for the sacred edifice.

This cabin belonged to a miner who had been an architect, and he had made a fancy little cottage of his home.

It was situated upon the Eagle Cliff road, and the parson urged it so that Kate consented to go, though she told him she was sure they would be overtaken by a storm.

They had left the cottage and were about to take a short trail home when two horsemen came up behind them.

It was just here that the miner had seen them, and so told Mr. Conrad.

After the miner had passed on the horsemen appeared as though they meant to pass, one on either side; but when alongside of the parson and Lady Gold Dust they seized each a bridle-rein and leveled a revolver.

"Come, you are prisoners."

"Cry out, and you shall be shot; but keep quiet, and no harm shall befall you, for it is money we want."

The parson groaned, and Kate Conrad said, indignantly:

"Unhand my bridle-rein, sir, or you will rue it."

"Come, Lady Gold Dust, you need not put on airs."

"You are worth a sound sum in ransom, and the boys will pay well for this pulpit-pounder, and we want money."

"Keep quiet, and all will be well; but make a fuss, and we'll gag and tie you both."

"Do not touch me and I will make no outcry; but this is an infamous outrage."

"Yes, it is indeed an outrage, and Heaven will never bless those who sin as you do," said the parson.

But for all that he was tied to his saddle, and a lariat was also passed about the waist of Kate Conrad and under the horse to the saddle-horn, so that she was held secure.

It now began to rain in torrents, and the men, as though prepared for such an emergency,

wrapped Kate and the parson up in india-rubber cloaks, so that they were enabled to keep perfectly dry.

One man then led the way with the parson by his side, and the other followed with Kate.

Thus they rode on through the storm and gathering darkness, and after a ride of some distance came upon two horsemen, whom, in the pitch-like blackness, they could barely see the outlines of.

It was here that the Dragoon had found the trail of four horses.

On they went into the heart of the wild mountains, until they came upon another party of horsemen, who had evidently been waiting for them some time.

Then all moved on at as brisk a pace as was possible in the storm and night.

From the words of her captors Kate found out when they turned from one trail into another, and feeling certain that they would be pursued, and knowing the storm was effacing all tracks, she dropped first her glove, then her handkerchief and next her whip.

Had the Dragoon gone on he would have found a veil, her cuffs, with the sleeve-buttons in them, a ribbon and the other glove.

Kate was determined that she would leave a trail which the storm would not destroy.

It was a long, fearful ride through the hours of the night, and after midnight when they at last reached the retreat of the Road Raiders.

Then Kate was aided to alight at a cabin, and within there was considerable comfort and a warm fire.

A supper also was upon a table for her, and a trunk, containing the fine wardrobe of some unfortunate lady traveler, and which she had been robbed of, was open, apparently for her use.

She had kept comparatively dry, in spite of the driving rain, and she was both very hungry and tired.

One to make the best of a bad situation, she immediately ate a good supper, and then threw herself down upon the cot-bed to sleep.

Her guards had in the mean time reported to the chief.

He sat alone in his cabin, and the leader of the kidnapping party came in, accompanied by none other than Tempest, the desperado.

The leader was the young lieutenant of the Road Raiders.

"Well, captain, we are back again, and we bagged the parson as well as the lady."

"I have placed her in the cabin prepared for her, and this man is the one from Gilt Edge City who was won over to our band."

"You have done well, Dudley; very well; but I hope this man can be trusted?"

"Oh, yes, chief, for he knows it is gold one way, rope another."

"It is indeed; but, my man, I wish you to remain as my spy in Gilt Edge City, and here you have a paper that will give you full instructions, for I am anxious that you should get back to-night, so as to avoid being trailed, and the rain will destroy your tracks."

"I will send a couple of men to guide you back to a point that you know, and ride hard to get in by dawn."

"I'll do it, cap'n."

"And just find out what reward will be given by the miners for the parson, and the amount that old Conrad will pay for his daughter."

"Ride out to the brook, on the Eagle Cliff road, the third day from this, and a man will meet you to get your report, and I will negotiate for the return of the captives."

"Here is money for you, so do your duty well."

"Disappoint me, and you shall be hunted to your death."

"Good-night, my man."

Tempest turned and departed, and, as the reader knows, reached his cabin about dawn.

As it was still raining he felt no anxiety about his trail; but almost immediately after the storm ceased, and the evidence remained against him.

Such was the story he told Matt Murdock, as the two rode along, and he continued:

"Now, pard, we has got ter convince ther chief how we was druv out o' Gilt Edge, and we will jist light out at night with ther leddy and hide her somewhar until we gits ther reward."

"I'll let you work it yer own way, fer I believes you kin do it."

"I'll try; but it will be about dawn when we arrive at the retreat."

"Jist about, but we don't want ter crowd 'em until sun-up, fer it might not be healthy."

So the two pressed on, both plotting against the Road Raiders, and Matt Murdock engaged in a plot to thwart the desperado in his little game for ransom for Kate Conrad.

#### CHAPTER XLVIII.

##### THE EXILES.

THE trail to the secret den of the Road Raiders was so complicated that Tempest, only having been over it in the night, was soon at a loss to follow it.

"I'm done up, pard," he said, as he came to a halt.

"You don't know the way?"



"I'm durned ef I do."  
 "Where do you remember that you were right last?"  
 "Back at them big trees on ther creek."  
 "Then come back there."  
 "Is you goin' ter show me ther way?"  
 "I'm going to show you how to find it."  
 "All right, ef you kin do it."  
 They rode back in the darkness to the place indicated.  
 "You are sure you passed here?"  
 "Yes."  
 "What proof have you?"  
 "We halted here a few minutes, and I rode from here on alongside the lieutenant, in ther lead."  
 "You rode the horse you are riding now?"  
 "Yas."  
 "Then start him ahead and give him the rein."  
 "I will follow."  
 "Pard."  
 "Well?"  
 "You has a brain."  
 "Thank you."  
 "I pulled ther horse off the trail awhile ago, fer he wanted ter go one way, and I thought my way was right."  
 "Then start."  
 They hurried on and the horse went forward at a brisk pace.  
 He remembered that he had been stabled and had been given a good feed up at the retreat.  
 So on they went until the dawn broke.  
 Then Tempest said they were not far from the retreat.  
 The valley was reached and the canyon turned into, the horse taking his own way.  
 Then came the steep climb up the mountain-side through the narrow chasm, and as they reached the top they were brought to a halt by the guard.  
 "Hands up! Who are yer?" cried the guard, protected himself by the rocks, and with a rifle at his shoulder.  
 "Pard, I is ther Gilt Edge spy, as was here with ther captives last night."  
 "I've come ter see ther chief," said the desperado.  
 "Yas, I knows yer now, fer I tuk yer to ther chief's cabin; but who is with yer?"  
 "A pilgrim as wants ter j'ine ther band."  
 "You had no right ter bring a man without askin' ther chief."  
 "Pard, we is both exiles, and it's all right, so shout fer ther chief."  
 The man gave a call, a comrade came, and word was sent to the chief.  
 Soon he returned with word to bring the men to him.  
 Murdock took in all that was before him, and yet appeared to be indifferent.  
 The chief was at breakfast, and the men went up to his cabin, where he was seated under the pine-straw shed in front of his door.  
 "Well, sir, back so soon?" he said, slowly, to Tempest.  
 "Yes, cap'n, as yer sees."  
 "And who have you with you?"  
 "A pard in distress!"  
 "Why are you here?"  
 "We is exiles."  
 "Exiles?"  
 "Yes, cap'n."  
 "What do you mean?"  
 "We was druv out o' Gilt Edge City."  
 "Ah! it seems very hard for me to keep a man there."  
 "I was willin' ter stay; but ther fact is we was a-playin' a leetle game o' keerds at The Barracks, early last night, and our partners was ther Darlin' of Destiny and Landlord Champ.  
 "Me and my pard was winnin' heavy, by a little trick we knows, when ther Dragoon up and covers us both, says we was cheatin', and thar was Old Nick ter pay.  
 "He told us we hed ter git out o' Gilt Edge, but ther crowd said hang us.  
 "Then he said no, he'd said he'd give us a chance and ter go.  
 "We didn't stay thar ter discuss things, but got."  
 "You were wise, for cheating is not allowed in Gilt Edge City; but who is your pard?"  
 "He's been my side-partner fer some time, and he's game ter kill, while he war a-plottin' a leetle game with me ter capter some o' ther big folks o' Gilt Edge, and fetch 'em ter you ontill ransom were paid."  
 "Indeed! then you may be a valuable man," and the chief gazed at Murdock with a look that seemed to read him through and through.  
 But the young miner met the gaze unflinchingly and said:  
 "I have an idea the Dragoon can be captured, sir."  
 "Indeed! and in what way?"  
 "Well, sir, he is a soldier, and if an officer and several men, or rather men pretending to be such, stopped at his cabin all night, I am sure they could capture him after dark and run him up here to you, along with his horses and all, while he also keeps a great deal of gold-dust in his cabin."  
 The chief sprung to his feet, his face flushed

with delight, and grasping Murdock by the hand, he cried:

"Young man, you are a treasure."  
 "Do this for me and I'll make your fortune."  
 "It can be done, I am sure, for I know about the different regiments, and officers, having been a soldier for five years myself."  
 "I can claim to be some new lieutenant, fresh from West Point, whom he does not know, and I'll take him in without a doubt."  
 "You shall be my second lieutenant if you do, and get a handsome sum as well."  
 "You have the uniforms, of course, sir?"  
 "No, I have not, unfortunately."  
 "It would be necessary to get the uniforms, arms, and equipments for the horses, and I do not think I should take less than four men."  
 "No, for he is a hard one to handle; but where can the uniforms and other things be gotten?"  
 "There is a sutler at the fifth stage station from Gilt Edge City, and they always buy such things, finding a ready sale at big money for them at times."  
 "Will you go there and get them?"  
 "Yes, sir, but I will need two pack-animals to bring them back."  
 "I will give you money to buy horses there, for I need more, and you can have a man to go with you, but not Tempest here, for I will need him."  
 "Any one will do, sir."  
 "When will you start?"  
 "To-night, sir, for I need to-day to rest."  
 "All right, my fine fellow, it is a bargain."  
 "I declare I feel elated, for I shall get a big ransom for my fair captive, another for the Gilt Edge parson, and more than you imagine in capturing this Darling of Destiny."  
 "Now I will have you shown quarters, and just make yourself at home."  
 The young miner thanked the chief for his kindness, and went with Tempest to the cabin assigned them.  
 "What in thunder is yer goin' ter do, pard?" said Tempest.  
 "You'll get your share, pard, so don't be alarmed."  
 "I saw that the chief did not take to me kindly, so I played that trump card about the Dragoon, and it will pan out big for us to catch him, for we'll get dust as well as revenge."  
 "That's so; but what about the gal?"  
 "I'll tell you my plan when I've thought it all out," was the reply of the miner, and Tempest was assured that Murdock was plotting some big game to play for their mutual interests.

## CHAPTER XLIX.

## MATT MURDOCK'S BOLD GAME.

It was Tempest's intention to try and get the ransom for the parson, which he knew the generous miners of Gilt Edge City would pay for his return.  
 He told Murdock that they must let the parson into their little scheme, and he would doubtless join them to regain his freedom, allowing them to make the money.  
 But against this arrangement they saw the parson ride away after dinner, and the chief told Murdock, whom he seemed to have taken a great fancy to, that it was to negotiate his own and Miss Conrad's ransom.  
 "And he will do it, for when they know he has vowed to return, if my terms are not agreed to, they will come round rather than see him come back and have the girl remain captive in my hands."  
 "I guess he'll arrange it all right, sir; but will you let me know who is to go with me to buy the uniforms?"  
 "I suppose, now that I have used the parson to arrange the ransom matter, you might as well take your pard with you."  
 "Tempest?"  
 "Yes."  
 "Thank you, sir, I suppose it would be better, and we'll start about sunset and push through with all haste."  
 "Come to me before you go and get the money you will need."  
 Murdock returned to his cabin, and sitting down wrote a few lines on a piece of paper, which he wrapped tightly around an arrow, which with a bow he found in the hut.  
 He was very cautious in his movements, and kept watching through the half-open door to see that no one approached.  
 His cabin was the end one of those occupied by the men, and had a door in the front, a small window in the rear.  
 Back of it a hundred feet was a cabin which had been used for the storage of booty taken by the Road Raiders, and it was strongly built, had a stout door and a padlock and chain to secure it.  
 This cabin had been cleared out for the use of Kate Conrad, and made as comfortable as was possible by the chief.  
 She had been forbidden by the guard, who carried her breakfast to her, to leave the cabin, though the door had been left open for air.  
 Murdock had spied her there, and a close observation through the rear window of his cabin convinced him that she was alone and no

special guard was kept over her, though the Road Raiders were all ordered to keep an eye upon her.

He saw her seated in the cabin near the door, and he seized upon the bow and arrow found in his cabin, as a means of communication.

He wrote on the slip of paper as follows:

"Do not retire to night. Be on the watch.  
 "The window in the rear of your cabin has a padlock and staples upon it, and will doubtless be locked to-night.  
 "By that way you must look for aid, and a knock will be given on the shutter as a signal."

Murdock then walked out of his cabin, made a circuit of it and saw that no one was looking.

Then he went in, opened the rear window, and taking a good aim, sent the arrow flying into Kate's cabin.

He saw the maiden start from her seat, look about her and then run and pick up the arrow.

Then he went out and sought Tempest, and the two gave their horses a good rubbing down, staked them out where there was plenty of grass, and made their preparations for their start.

"I'll clean your guns, Tempest, as I am going to look over mine, while you circulate among the boys and see if you can find out what the parson has been sent away for by the chief."

"All right, pard," said Tempest, and he did as he was told, not aware that Murdock already knew just why the parson had gone.

When Tempest returned he found his own, and Murdock's belt of arms, all cleaned and loaded, but the young miner was not there.

Looking out of the cabin he saw him coming.

"All right, pard, the chief gave me money to buy the uniforms and a couple of good horses, so we will be off at once."

They left the cabin with their traps, saddled and mounted their horses, and rode down the chasm path to the canyon.

"Yer pushes fast, pard, fer a long journey," said Tempest, as Murdock pressed on at a canter.

"I am anxious to strike the stage trail as soon as possible."

The chief had directed him how to turn to reach the well-beaten Overland trail, and so he held on until at last they turned into it, and at a point not far from where the coach had been halted the day that Kate Conrad rode on the box with Ribbon Rob.

Once in the trail Murdock knew that their horses' trails would not be noticed, where there were so many more tracks.

And once in the Overland trail Murdock suddenly halted, and quickly throwing his lariat over the neck of the horse ridden by the desperado, at the same time leveled a revolver, while he said:

"Pard Tempest, you are my prisoner for keeps."

## CHAPTER L.

## THE YOUNG MINER'S TRUMP CARD.

"Oh, pard, I say what does this mean?"  
 "I don't want no jokin'," cried the amazed desperado, as he glanced into the muzzle of Murdock's revolver.  
 "It means, Tempest, that I am not the man you took me for—hold on, pard, for you have not a bullet in your revolvers; they are loaded blank, for I saw to that."  
 "Cuss yer ferever, Matt Murdock," hissed the desperado.  
 The young miner laughed and said:  
 "Now, Tempest, I am going to tie you in your saddle, or kill you if you resist."  
 He did as he said, tying his captive's feet beneath his horse, and his hands behind him.  
 Then he took hold of the bridle-rein of Tempest's horse and started off at a sweeping gallop.  
 "Whar is yer going?"  
 "To Gilt Edge City."  
 "They'll hang yer, and me, too."  
 "I guess not, for you played me for as bad a man as you are, and I played you for a fool. The men in Gilt Edge think I am of your stripe, pard, and I let them think so; but it will all be cleared up soon, and they'll see how nicely the Dragoon took you in with my aid."  
 "Oh, Tempest! how I did squirm when the Darling of Destiny told me I was a cheat and ordered me off with you."  
 "You cussed varmint, I'll kill you yet."  
 "A threatened man lives long, they say, Tempest," was the reply.  
 "Don't yer intend ter git ther gal and ther ransom fer her?"  
 "I intend that Miss Conrad shall be free to-night, and that is why I am riding so fast."  
 Tempest swore and growled as they went along.  
 He complained that the bonds hurt him, but all to no purpose, for Murdock kept the horses at a run, dashed into Gilt Edge City at the same pace, and swept on toward the cabin of the Dragoon before any stragglers that were out could recognize them.  
 Riding up to the cabin of the Dragoon, he met them at the door, for he heard the rapid clatter of the hoofs.  
 Their horses were dead beat, but Murdock



did not care for that, and springing to the ground said quickly:

"Captain, here is Tempest, and he wishes accommodations for a few days with you, though you'll have to keep him ironed and in snug quarters."

"Murdock, I am glad to see you, and you are back sooner than I expected."

"Ho, Hannibal, bring a pair of handcuffs and some irons for the ankles here, and take this prisoner to the little cuddy I built in the cabin," said the Dragoon.

Hannibal appeared, and it did not take him a minute to take the prisoner from his horse and iron him.

"Now, captain, I wish you to go with me; but please lend me one of your best horses, and you will need another for Miss Conrad."

"Ah! she is free, then?"

"No; but we will soon get her out, though you will have to carry a horse for her, as not an animal can be gotten from the corral of the Road Raiders."

"Her saddle and bridle hang on the corner of her cabin, and no special guard is kept over her, I am sure."

"Then we can secure her without doubt—in fact, we must."

"Yes, captain; but let us ride for it at once, and please let Hannibal keep my horse and Tempest's out of sight, and watch him close, for he is a terror."

"Hannibal will keep an eye on him, you may be sure."

Five minutes after the Dragoon and Murdock rode swiftly away from the cabin, the latter mounted upon one of the fine black horses of the young soldier, while another animal followed unled behind.

They rode at a sweeping gallop, and held the pace until they reached the spot where Tempest had been made prisoner.

Here Murdock led, telling the Dragoon that the trail led along the ridge down into the valley, and upon the mountain on the other side was the Road-Raiders' retreat.

"We will have to leave our horses in the valley, and climb the mountain, for no horse can go there; but I got the way down as fine as I could during the day, and I hope to come out just in the rear of Miss Conrad's cabin."

"It will be hard for her to get down the rough mountain, but she will not care, I think."

"Not with freedom as a reward."

"Now, captain, there is something else I wish to tell you."

"Well, Murdock?"

"The parson was let off to-day by the chief, to go to Gilt Edge City and get his reward for Miss Conrad, and a ransom for himself, which Captain Brass very naturally thinks will be paid by the miners."

"Now he got in before I did, and as I passed The Barracks coming down, I saw him with a crowd about him."

"He'll hardly return before to-morrow afternoon, so you can see him at The Barracks to-morrow morning, and I'll give you a pointer on him, and Mr. Conrad must not let it be known that Miss Conrad has returned."

"In fact, no one must know it."

"Then I have a little plan on hand by which I am to capture you, and I am coming down in uniform with four bogus soldiers to make you prisoner," and Murdock laughingly told his plot, and gave the Dragoon some other information of importance.

After quite a hard ride along the ridge, they descended to the valley, and crossing it, halted at the base of the mountain.

A glare on the tree-tops told Murdock where the camp of the Road-Raiders was, for the fires seemed to be still burning brightly.

Leaving their horses, and muzzling them, to avoid any mishap from a neigh, they began to climb the steep mountain-side.

It was a long and hard climb, and midnight had passed before they reached the top and glanced down into the little valley, or glen.

The camp-fires were still smoldering in front of several of the cabins, and Murdock soon placed the one occupied by Kate Conrad.

He had been a pretty correct guide, for they were not a hundred yards from it.

Making their way along through the piled-up rocks and pine thicket that bordered the ridge, they came to the rear of the cabin.

Not a soul was visible in the camp, and they crept cautiously down to it.

"I will get the saddle and bridle that hangs around the corner, while you knock lightly upon the window-shutter."

"When it is answered, you will have to take the auger that I asked you to bring, and bore around the staples that hold the lock and you can take it out."

The Dragoon stepped to the window and Murdock went around the cabin.

In a moment he returned, and he carried Kate's saddle and bridle.

"I will wait for you on the ridge."

"Have you knocked?" he whispered.

"Yes, and had a response," was the return whisper.

The Dragoon now bored into the shutter, and a dozen holes enabled him to take the staples

holding the padlock out with the piece of wood which he had cut in a circle with the auger.

Opening the shutter, he beheld Kate Conrad standing there.

"Miss Conrad, I have come to take you home; but you will have to be brave and stand considerable fatigue."

"Oh, Captain Gaston! have you dared come here?"

"Sh—do not speak, but let me aid you from the window, if you are ready."

"I am all ready."

He lifted her lightly from the window to the ground, hesitated, and then drawing his knife from his belt, said:

"I will leave my card for Captain Brass, for this has my name on it."

Sticking the knife in the window-sill, he took Kate's arm and hastened up to the ridge with her.

There stood Murdock, ready to lead the way.

"Miss Conrad, let me present to you my friend, Matt Murdock, to whom you owe your escape, for he has suffered himself to be maligned and driven from Gilt Edge City to aid you," said the Dragoon, warmly.

Kate grasped his hand and said, in a way that meant a world of thanks:

"God bless you, sir."

"It was the captain's plot, and I simply carried it out, for he could not come here to join the Raiders as I could," said Matt, and then he led the way down the steep mountain-side.

It was a long and perilous descent; but the Dragoon aided Kate with his strong arm, and at last the valley was reached.

Murdock hastily saddled the horse that Kate was to ride, and mounting, they rode off at a swift gallop.

Climbing to the long ridge they dashed along it, and reaching the Overland trail drew rein.

"Here I leave you, captain, and you may expect to be arrested, as I explained, within a few days."

"Regarding the parson you will not forget, and when I get back I expect to bring you valuable information."

"Good-night."

So saying he rode rapidly away, while the Dragoon and Kate Conrad started for Gilt Edge City.

## CHAPTER LI.

### THE VOW KEPT.

"Now, Miss Conrad, it is nearly dawn, and I am going to ask you to ride at full speed all the way to your father's home," said the Darling of Destiny, when he had said farewell to Murdock and turned the head of his horse toward Gilt Edge City.

"I can stand anything, Captain Gaston; but the poor horses?"

"They must stand it, for I wish you to reach home without being seen."

"Very well, sir, I am ready," was the reply.

The two splendid horses, already having been hard ridden, were put into a long, sweeping run, and they held it, up-hill and down.

"Oh, we will kill them," cried Kate, in pity.

"No; I know what they can stand."

"See, they run without urging."

"Yes; but I pity them."

"May I ask what you think of your fellow-captive, Parson Prim?"

"I do not like him; but I felt sorry for him, as he was more frightened than I was."

"The chief made him vow most sacredly to return to him, and sent him to Gilt Edge City to get ransom for our release."

"So I heard from Murdock," and the Dragoon told Kate as they flew along the noble part that the young miner had played for her release, and how he had allowed himself to be driven out of Gilt Edge City as a comrade of Tempest.

"It shall all be made clear how nobly he served me, and those who looked upon him as a scamp will be glad to do him honor," said Kate.

It was just getting gray in the eastern sky as the two dashed up to the stockade gate near the cabin of Fort Folly.

Leaping from the back of his horse, the Dragoon sprung over the stockade and walked rapidly to the door.

A knock brought a response in the voice of Mr. Conrad:

"Who is there?"

"The Dragoon, and I have good news for you."

A cry of joy came from Mrs. Conrad within, and Mr. Conrad soon came to the door.

"I wish the stockade gate key, for I have brought Miss Conrad home."

"Quick, please, for it must not be known yet that she is here."

Mr. Conrad sprung back into the room and seized the key from where it was placed at night, while Mrs. Conrad, who had heard all, hastily began to dress.

But the Dragoon was already gone to the gate, and having Kate to dismount, he hastily took the saddle and bridle from his horse and said:

"Please ask your father to carry this in, for

I must get home by the time it is daylight—good-by."

Leaving Kate to lock the gate he mounted Triller and dashed off, followed by Scout, the two animals seeming to find that their tremendous ride was over, for they sped along with renewed energy.

In the mean time Mr. Conrad had rushed out to meet his daughter, and hastened with her into the house where she sprung into her mother's arms.

"And I have a welcome for you too, Kate, and am so happy to see you home," cried Sylvester Vernon, who had been awakened and hastily dressed himself.

Kate greeted him kindly, while he asked:

"But how did you escape?"

"The Darling of Destiny brought me home," was the quiet response, and a scowl came upon the face of the secretary.

"Now I will go to bed, and you all must know it is not to be told that I am home yet, as the Dragoon asked it as a special favor."

"I cannot see why," petulantly said Vernon.

"Nor do I know; but it is his request, and I shall not go against it."

"Oh! I am so tired, and I'll be content to sleep all day," and Kate went to her room, while the others returned to their beds, but in a far happier mood than before.

In the mean time the Dragoon had gone flying down the valley, and, without seeing a human being stirring reached his cabin.

Hannibal arose promptly at his call, and let him in, with the remark:

"I am glad to see you home, sir."

"Thank you, Hannibal, and what of your prisoner?"

"He's safe, sir."

"Well, I am very tired, so will sleep for several hours."

"Have breakfast at eight, please," and in ten minutes after the Dragoon was sleeping soundly.

But he was up at eight, and after a hearty breakfast went to the small room where Tempest was kept a prisoner.

Seating himself in front of him he said:

"My man, I have some questions to ask you, and I expect the truth."

The desperado saw that he had a dangerous man to deal with, and every question asked him he answered, though in a sullen tone.

"Thank you," and the Dragoon went out, mounted a fresh horse and rode to the Barracks.

## CHAPTER LII.

### THE DRAGOON AND THE PARSON.

WHEN the Darling of Destiny approached The Barracks, he saw that something unusual was going on.

There was a very large crowd gathered there for a week day, when the miners were all supposed to be at work.

He saw the horses of Mr. Conrad and Sylvester Vernon hitched to the rack, and riding up, left his animal near.

Then he ascended to the piazza, where his coming was greeted with a shout.

Mr. Conrad came toward him, and offered his hand, while Vernon bowed.

The landlord also greeted him, and said:

"We have a surprise for you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, we know where Miss Conrad is, and I sent up to have her father come down."

"Well?"

"The parson has returned."

"No!"

"Yes, he arrived last night, and after a welcome given him by the boys, he told his story; but here he is to tell you."

The parson now advanced and shook hands most cordially with the Dragoon, while he said:

"Oh, my brother, I have been delivered from the hands of the Philistines."

"Indeed, how was that?" asked the Darling of Destiny, with great interest.

"Well, sir, who do you think were the captors of Miss Conrad and myself?"

"I judged that it was Captain Brass, for I followed your trail, which Miss Conrad kindly marked—"

"Followed our trail after such a storm?"

"Yes, Parson Prim, for Miss Conrad kindly marked it by dropping a glove, handkerchief, whip, cuff and other little things."

"Three cheers for the Lady Gold Dust!" cried a voice, and they were given with a vim.

"So you knew that we were the captives of the Road-Raiders, captain?"

"Yes, as I know that Flush, Fred, Darby, Bruiser Bill, and Tempest and Murdock went to join the Road Raiders."

This created a sensation, and the parson looked puzzled, but he said:

"Well, captain, they took us to their camp, and Miss Conrad was given pleasant quarters, as was I also, for Captain Brass meant us no harm, his motive being a ransom."

"He has a large force, is strongly fortified, and so dictates to the citizens of Gilt Edge City."

"And what does he dictate, parson?"



"Well, captain, he paroled me, upon my Christian word, of honor to return to him, I may say my solemn vow that I would do so, if negotiations failed."

"And the negotiations, parson?"

"He demands for the ransom of Miss Conrad ten thousand dollars."

"He is modest; but what does he value you at?"

"Five thousand."

"That is fifteen thousand."

"Yes, sir."

"And if this is paid?"

"We are both free."

"If it is not paid?"

"But it will be, captain."

"I say if it is not paid?"

"He threatens to hold possession of Miss Conrad until it is, and to show he is in earnest will hang me."

"That is a savage threat."

"And he will keep it."

"But how is this money to be paid?"

"I am to take the money to a given spot in the valley, accompanied by Mr. Conrad, while he will send Miss Conrad to meet me under charge of a man who will receive the money."

"His force will be back on the hills, and your force will be, and each can see the others when we move down into the valley to the meeting-place, so there can be no treachery."

"Well, Mr. Conrad, I suppose you would give ten thousand dollars for your daughter's liberty?"

"Gladly, sir, if it beggared me."

"And, gentlemen, I suppose five thousand dollars could be raised to get the parson out of the hands of the Philistines?"

There were scores of voices raised pledging various sums, and Landlord Champ said:

"The sum could be readily raised, for you can put me down for a hundred."

"One moment, gentlemen," and the voice of the Dragoon stilled the crowd.

"This plot of Captain Brass is a good one, and would have to be agreed to, but for one circumstance."

"And what is that?" cried a voice.

"The fact that the Lady Gold Dust escaped last night from the Road Raiders' retreat, and is now in her father's home."

The parson looked dazed, while a silence fell upon the crowd, so deeply were they impressed.

"Is this not so, Mr. Conrad?"

"It is, captain; my daughter is at home in safety, and I did not tell you of it, gentlemen, as this gentleman, who rescued her—"

"Through the aid of one other whom now I cannot name," modestly said the Dragoon.

"The captain," continued Mr. Conrad, "requested that I should not make known her return for awhile, and I now see that his motive was not to let it get out until he chose to make it known himself."

"And my motive, gentlemen, in keeping it hidden, was to prevent the escape of the parson here, whom now I beg to say is my prisoner!"

Had a bomb fallen into The Barracks, it would not have created greater consternation than did the words of the Darling of Destiny.

As he spoke he seized the parson in his powerful grasp, there was an instant's struggle, and he had him handcuffed.

The crowd pressed forward in anger; but the Dragoon was now aroused, for he cried in a voice of thunder:

"Back, men, all of you, and hear me!"

"This man is my prisoner, mind you, and I shall hold him secure until the proper time when he is needed."

"He is no parson, but a fraud."

"He is one of the Road Raider gang who volunteered to play this part that he might capture Miss Conrad, and more, still playing the part before her of a captive, he was seeking to have you buy him from Captain Brass, after which he was to live in Gilt Edge City as the Road Raiders' spy, a wolf in the garb of a lamb."

"I say this, gentlemen, and I know it."

Mr. Conrad, Vernon and Landlord Champ were as deeply amazed as were the others at this bold charge.

There was a wild murmur going through the crowd, and the pretended parson took advantage of it to say:

"Pards, this is false! I am a minister of the Gospel!"

"Silence, sir! you are a double-dyed fraud, and you made Tempest your tool while you were here, as I have the proof— No, no, men, he is my prisoner, I say, and I shall protect him, if I have to kill to do it."

"When the proper time comes I will produce him, but now he goes with me."

"Ho, Brindle, drinks and cigars for the gentlemen."

The determined manner and the fact that they knew he was not to be trifled with, aided by his timely remark to Brindle, quelled the trouble, and cheer after cheer was given for the Dragoon as he rode away, carrying his prisoner mounted upon the Road Raider chief's horse, which he had loaned the "parson" to ride to Gilt Edge City.

"Captain, you are the best I ever saw,

"Command me in anything," said Landlord Champ, following the Dragoon to his home.

"I will call on you soon, Champ," was the reply, and the Dragoon rode off with his trembling prisoner and accompanied by Mr. Conrad and Sylvester Vernon.

#### CHAPTER LIII.

##### A SPECIAL MISSION.

WHEN Matt Murdock left the Dragoon and Kate Conrad, he went on at a lope, which the splendid horse he bestrode seemed to enjoy.

At the first stage-station he stopped for a short rest and gave his horse a good feed, telling the man in charge that he was bearing dispatches.

At the next station he left his horse and mounted an animal he hired, and thus he pushed on until afternoon, when he rode into the village which was known as "Number Five," on account of its being the fifth stage halting-place on the Overland trail.

Here was an Indian agency, a sutler's store, and in fact quite a settlement.

But Murdock lost no time looking about him, but putting his horse up at the tavern, quickly sought the sutler's establishment.

To his great delight he found just what he wanted there, and an officer's undress uniform, a sergeant's and four for private soldiers were purchased, along with military saddles and bridles.

Of course the sutler charged him for the second-hand things considerably more than they had cost when new.

But this Murdock did not care for, and three pack-saddles were bought and the things packed into them.

Then of course the sutler had horses to sell, and three good animals were purchased.

It was now nearly sunset, and going to the tavern the young miner ate a hearty supper and went to bed, telling the landlord to call him at midnight and have his horses ready for the road.

Sharply on the hour he started, and passing one station without halting, before dawn, he stopped after sunrise at the third from Gilt Edge City.

Here he had breakfast and gave his horses a two hours' rest and himself a good nap.

Then he pressed on to where he had left the black horse belonging to the Dragoon, and found the animal well rested and ready for the road.

It was an hour after dawn when he rode up the chasm path to the Road Raiders' retreat, and Captain Brass was amazed to see him back so soon.

"Did you get them?"

"Yes, sir."

"All?"

"Yes, chief, saddles, bridles and uniforms, and I bought the three horses as you ordered, and traded mine for this splendid black."

"Of course you gave big boot for that animal?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have done splendidly; but where is Tempest?"

"I left him behind, sir, for he was recognized as an old offender and made prisoner."

"You do not mean it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could you not get him out in some way?"

"I thought it more important to push through this matter on hand, and then see to the release of Tempest."

"You are right; but you seem to hate this Dragoon as heartily as I do."

"He drove me out of Gilt Edge City, branded me as a cheat, and I left a good paying mine there," fiercely said the miner.

"Well, Murdock, you must be worn out, for you have made a wonderful ride, so get your breakfast and then sleep until noon."

"I will have your things unpacked, and fit the uniforms to the men."

"I bought a sergeant's uniform, besides my own and four for private soldiers."

"Well, it will look that much more real; but I will have to get the barber at work on the heads and faces of the men that are to accompany you, so as to make them look soldierly."

"Yes, sir, they must look what they pretend to be."

"And your plan is to seek the hospitality of the Dragoon for the night, and seize him?"

"Yes, sir, I can ask it as a fellow-soldier, making up a good story, and I got some information regarding officers and regiments from the settlers."

"I will seize the Dragoon and that large negro servant of his, and if it can be done without attracting attention, I will try and kidnap three other persons who will pay well."

"Who are they?"

"One is the one-legged miner, Bad Luck, who I am sure knows where the mine of that old miner whom they call Judge, is."

"Ha! does he know that?" eagerly asked the chief.

"I have an idea that he does, sir."

"Then capture him by all means and we will force the secret from him."

"Then Landlord Champ would pay a big sum

for his release, and with Mr. Conrad a captive with his daughter, the wife would pay any amount."

"You plan well, Murdock; but the daughter is no longer a captive."

"Then you got the sum you demanded?"

"No, she escaped."

"Do you mean it, Captain Brass?"

"I am sorry to say that I do."

"She was rescued by that accursed Dragoon."

"He came to our retreat the night you left, cut the lock out of the cabin and carried her off."

"You are sure he did it, sir?"

"He left his bowie-knife, with his name on it, sticking in the window."

"But how could he get here?"

"That I do not know; but he came, that is certain, and she has gone."

"And the parson?"

"Has not returned from Gilt Edge City yet to report; but I guess we'll get the amount I demand for him."

"I hope so, sir," and after still further conversation the miner sought the rest he so much needed.

When he awoke he found five men in uniform, and in their clean-shaven faces and close-cut hair they looked like real soldiers.

Their horses were ready saddled, and their sabers hung to their saddle-borns.

In a short while after placing himself in the hands of the barber, Murdock came out looking very youthful and handsome.

Donning his uniform it was very becoming, and with best wishes from the chief and his half-score remaining men, the pretended soldiers set off on their trip to Gilt Edge City.

It was two hours after dark when they rode up to The Barracks, and Landlord Champ at once told the supposed lieutenant that a dragoon captain was there, and he called the Darling of Destiny and presented him to "Lieutenant Matthews."

"I cannot let you and your men stop at a hotel, lieutenant, for I have a large cabin, and you must be my guests," said the Dragoon, and he mounted his horse and led the way to his home.

A good supper was served by Hannibal, and then the men were given a large room to sleep in, the lieutenant telling them to leave their arms outside in the hall.

Just as they were ready for bed the Dragoon and six miners, armed with rifles, entered, and the pretended soldiers found themselves in iron bonds before they realized what had occurred, while their uniforms were taken to serve in carrying out the plot to its end.

Just at dawn a cavalcade rode away from the Dragoon's cabin.

They were the Darling of Destiny, Murdock in uniform, five miners, shaved up and in uniform, Mr. Conrad, Landlord Champ, Hannibal and Bad Luck.

All were well mounted and armed to the teeth.

They rode along at an easy pace, and as they drew near the valley into which opened the canyon that led to the retreat of the Road Raiders, a change was made in the order of march.

First rode Murdock, and by his side the Dragoon, the latter apparently bound with a stout lariat.

Behind these were Landlord Champ, Mr. Conrad, Bad Luck and Hannibal, the four seeming also to be bound tightly with strong ropes.

Bringing up the rear were the five pretended soldiers.

They were spied by the lookout on the rocks, and at once reported to Captain Brass.

All was at once excitement in camp, where the chief, looking through his spy-glass, cried joyously:

"That splendid fellow Murdock has won, for he has the Dragoon a prisoner—yes, and the negro, and also Mr. Conrad, Landlord Champ, and the one-legged miner."

"Boys, stand ready to cheer them as they ride into the glen."

The Road Raiders did stand ready, and they were nearly beside themselves with delight at the splendid success of Murdock.

Up the chasm-path in single file rode the party, until they reached the open space on top.

Thirty paces away stood the chief and his men, grouped together and shouting vociferously.

Then quickly the party of horsemen formed five abreast, and to their front rode the Darling of Destiny, his bonds suddenly falling off, as did those of the other supposed prisoners.

"Hands up, Road Raiders!" came in thunder tones from the Dragoon.

Then the order was given:

"Charge!"

With a cheer and a revolver in each hand the band of horsemen charged upon the panic-stricken Road Raiders.

"Fight them back! Kill the traitor dogs!"

So shrieked Captain Brass, as he opened fire upon the attacking party, and hot and fast rung out the revolver-shots.

But as Captain Brass spoke he fell to the



ground from a shot at the hand of the Dragoon, and loudly the flying outlaws cried for quarter.

The Dragoon stood gazing down at the wounded chief, and calling to Hannibal, said:

"Come here and see if this wound is fatal, Hannibal."

The negro examined the nature of the injury and said:

"Yes, sir; he will not live an hour."

The chief opened his eyes at this and said:

"Do you not know me, Earl Gaston?"

"Yes; you are Richard Rutherford."

"I am."

"Have you no confession to make?"

"What do you wish me to say?"

"I wish you to tell the truth, to sign what I write in the presence of witnesses."

"Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"You know what I will write?"

"I can guess."

The Dragoon sent up to the cabin of the chief for pen, ink and paper, and hastily wrote a few lines and read it aloud.

"You will sign?"

"Yes; for my death is at hand and I have ceased to be revengeful."

"You were not the one to be revengeful."

"You are avenged?"

"When you sign this paper, yes, and when you die."

Calling to Mr. Conrad and Landlord Champ the Dragoon asked them to witness the signature of the Road Raider chief to the paper, and they did so.

"Now, Richard Rutherford, one question more."

"Yes, Gaston."

"Where is my father?"

"In this camp."

"Great God! you did not kill him then?"

"No; I visited his cabin, pretending to be an officer of the Rocky Mountain Detective Band, and forced him to go with me."

"He had found the richest mine in these mountains, and would not tell me where it was."

"I threatened, but to no purpose."

"He had sent sixty thousand dollars East and paid all the money he was supposed to owe, and I pretended that I had gotten it."

"Still he kept his secret of the mine."

"In the rear of my cabin is a small hut, and you will find him there."

"The key is on my belt."

The Dragoon stooped quickly, tore the key from the belt and ran hastily toward the cabin of the dying chief.

The door in the rear of the cabin was found, hidden by a grizzly-bear skin, it was unlocked, and there, in his prison-pen, six-by-eight feet, was the old miner who had so mysteriously disappeared from Gilt Edge City.

His hair and beard were long and matted, and they were snow-white.

But the eyes were full of fire, the form still erect and strong.

"Father! at last I have found you!"

"My brave, my noble boy!"

It was all that was said, and upon the touching scene I let fall the curtain.

## CHAPTER LIV.

### CONCLUSION.

THERE was considerable booty found in the camp of the Road Raiders, and the miners who had impersonated soldiers and gone with the Darling of Destiny made what they called a "rich haul" in firearms, furs, horses and other things, not to speak of the money taken from the outlaws.

Captain Brass and two-thirds of his men had fallen under the fire of the Dragoon's party, and several of the latter had been wounded and one miner was killed.

But Hannibal, who had been a physician's servant before he took to soldiering, had studied medicine and surgery, having a talent that way, and was certainly a good surgeon and doctor, and he dressed the wounds of the sufferers most skillfully.

That night was passed in the outlaw retreat the dead were buried, the booty packed, and the next day the cavalcade started for Gilt Edge City, the Darling of Destiny and his father leading, and riding side by side.

It was nearly sunset when they came near Gilt Edge City, and the Dragoon announced their coming by a few notes upon his silver bugle.

But they had already been espied, and, as it was Sunday, all Gilt Edge City was out to receive them.

And such a reception, such a scene had never been known before.

Ribbon Rob had driven in a short while before, and as he gazed upon the prisoners, and heard that Tempest, the pretended parson and five more outlaws were already prisoners, he cried in ecstasy:

"Lordy! Lordy! but ther Rock o' Ages will have to be made bigger, for there'll be a round dozen Road Raiders ter stretch hemp."

Nor was Ribbon Rob wrong, for the citizens of Gilt Edge City enjoyed what they called a "hanging bee," and from that day there was no longer danger in traveling the Overland trail.

The day after his return home, the Dragoon and his father rode up to Fort Folly, and were greeted most warmly.

Sylvester Vernon, the Dragoon was told, had gone that day by stage to the East; but they did not say that the reason was his having been rejected by Kate Conrad.

The father and son were easily persuaded to remain to supper, and as the Dragoon and Kate stood in the piazza that night, the others being in the sitting-room, he said:

"Miss Conrad, I wish to explain the mystery that I have allowed to hang over me, and, having accomplished my purpose, I can do so now, if you care to listen."

"Gladly will I, Captain Gaston."

"I am a soldier, a graduate of West Point, and I have been stationed on the border for five years, my command, the —th Dragoons, being considered the best Indian-fighters in the army."

"My father was a rich man, president of a bank East, and lived happily with my sister, a lovely girl whom we will now have come out here on a visit, when my father returns from his old home."

"In my father's bank was a young man whom he had befriended, and advanced from a menial position to that of cashier."

"My father came East nearly three years ago to visit me, and on his way back was met with a letter from the cashier, Richard Rutherford, that he should not return, or he would be at once put in jail, after having used fifty thousand dollars of the bank's money."

"My father had committed no crime, and yet he was stunned by the blow."

"He saw by the papers that fifty thousand dollars had been lost by him in speculation, and that the bank would hardly be able to pull through."

"In his despair he wrote to my sister and to me, vowing his innocence, and saying he was a fugitive, though guilty of no crime."

"I went East, and made a thorough investigation."

"So thorough in fact, that finding he was to be found out, the guilty man escaped."

"It was Richard Rutherford, and he was not captured, try as we might."

"But my father's innocence was established."

"Still, he was a wanderer, where, no one knew."

"I put detectives to find him, but they failed, so I supposed he had taken his own life."

"Last fall I was delighted to receive a letter from the bank, telling me that sixty thousand dollars in gold had been received from my father in half a dozen separate sums, with a letter telling them to pay back the amount he was said to be a defrauder for, and with interest."

"As my father was not to be found, the money was placed to my credit, as he requested, in case the bank had closed up its affairs."

"Then I knew my father was in the mines, and I determined to find him."

"I obtained a leave for six months, and, with no rank on my uniform, I started forth, getting a special commission as a detective from the Government."

"I have always been an athlete, a dead shot, and am a good trailer, and so Hannibal and myself began our work of finding my father."

"I traced him to Gilt Edge City, and I soon found out that he had disappeared mysteriously."

"I wrote East to find he had not gone there, and recognizing in the Red Raider chief Richard Rutherford, I suspected foul play toward my father, and I plotted to solve the mystery, and I have done so."

"The mine my father found he says is an immensely rich one, and we went there this morning to find it had not been disturbed."

"He goes back to the East, to bring my sister, and soon after his return I go to the army again, unless you bid me resign and live for you, for, Kate, I loved you the first moment I saw you, and my love has grown with each moment of my life since."

"Remain always, for I love you, and loving you, Earl Gaston, I sent from me to-day Sylvester Vernon, whom my parents were anxious that I should marry."

Such was Kate's answer, and, when in the fall she was married to Earl Gaston, there was another marriage, for Matthew Murdock, who was discovered to have been well reared, but preferred a wild life, won the heart of Isabel Gaston, the beautiful sister of the Darling of Destiny.

Nor is Ribbon Rob to be forgotten, for he gave up stage-driving, turned miner and married Pink, Kate Conrad's pretty maid.

Since those days Gilt Edge City has grown into a city in reality, and among its millionaire residents are the names of Conrad, Murdock, and last but not least, Earl Gaston, he that was once known as the Darling of Destiny.

THE END.

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The True Heroism. For three little boys.  
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Courtship Melinda. For three boys and one lady.  
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Antecedents. For three gentlemen and three ladies.  
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Lost Charlie; or, the Gipsy's Revenge. For numerous characters.  
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The Lesson Well Worth Learning. For two males and two females.

### Dime Dialogues, No. 19.

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California Uncle. For 3 males and 3 females.  
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How People are Insured. A "duet."  
Mayor. Acting Charade. For four characters.  
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The Mysterious G. G. For 2 females and 1 male.  
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